



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

This thesis has been submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a postgraduate degree (e.g. PhD, MPhil, DClinPsychol) at the University of Edinburgh. Please note the following terms and conditions of use:

This work is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, which are retained by the thesis author, unless otherwise stated.

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge.

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the author.

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author.

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given.

**Critical Happiness: Examining the beliefs that young Lao
volunteers in Vientiane hold about the things that make life good.**

Christina McMellon

PhD Social Policy

University of Edinburgh

2015

Abstract

Happiness is consistently cited as one of the things that people consider most important in their lives and yet is a slippery concept about which it is difficult to establish a shared understanding. There is increasing agreement that Gross National Product (GDP) is not a sufficient indicator of progress and that alternative measures may need to include the subjective aspects of wellbeing, or happiness. However, if policy makers and development workers are to seriously consider happiness, clarity is required about what it means to different people and such clarity must be grounded in the everyday experiences of the people whose lives social and development policies aim to improve.

Despite increasing interest in the concept of happiness within Laos, academic research focusing upon positive subjective experience is limited. Young Lao people who volunteer with Non-Profit Associations (NPAs) in Vientiane occupy a unique position at the crossroads of a country that continues to be affected by a complex political legacy, a rapidly modernising capital city and a newly visible civil society. The findings from the current research provide rich data from 18 months of ethnographic and participative fieldwork with this specific group of young people in Vientiane. The research addresses the following questions:

- What do the ways that young Lao volunteers in Vientiane express happiness tell us about the ways that they conceptualise happiness?
- What do young volunteers in Vientiane say makes them happy?
- What beliefs do young volunteers in Vientiane have about happiness?
- How do these beliefs about happiness fit with young volunteers' expressed experiences of happiness?

This thesis identifies three key conceptual models that research participants used to express happiness including 'Being Happy' (happiness is a present moment choice), 'Becoming

Happy’ (happiness is something to be achieved) and ‘Happy Being With Others’ (happiness is located in relationships between people).

Further, three culturally constructed ‘happiness scripts’ that research participants share are outlined and discussed. The three scripts are: “The way to be happy is to be a good Lao person”, “I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and to have an easy life” and “I am happy when I follow my heart”. These scripts each combine a conceptual mode of happiness with a focus on specific aspects of their lives that research participants say make them happy and a set of shared beliefs about happiness. These three scripts offer normative accounts of different pathways that research participants believe will lead to happiness. The research demonstrates, however, how research participants hold multiple scripts simultaneously and looks at the interactions and tensions between the scripts and between the scripts and participants’ lived experiences.

The research concludes that the socially constructed nature of the happiness scripts and the multiple conceptual models of happiness used by the research participants emphasise the need for self-awareness and transparency in conversations about happiness. Any consideration of happiness at policy level must include open and critical discussion about the happiness script that is being promoted. At the individual level participants valued positive opportunities to become aware of and challenge their own assumptions about the things that are most important in their lives were beneficial to their happiness. The thesis, therefore, recommends a shift in policy focus from solely measuring happiness to promoting positive conversations about happiness at policy, community and individual levels. Happiness is both an important experience and a slippery concept. It is both critical that we consider it and vital that we remain critical of it.

Declaration

This thesis has been composed by me, Christina McMellon, and the research described in the thesis is all my own work. The work presented here has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed:

Acknowledgements

I feel overwhelmed thinking of all the people who have been involved in this thesis over the past five years. These acknowledgements, therefore, run the risk of becoming Oscar-esque, but there are not many times in life when one gets to express public gratitude for all of the wonderful people who have made an impact. So, here goes...

First and foremost I want to thank to all of the anonymous but definitely not forgotten research participants and all of the people who helped me in my fieldwork and provided friendship during my time in Vientiane. Among those whose names can be used, particular mentions go out to Phout, Phonesay, Xuyen, Sombath, Boutsady, Viengkham, Lis, Anna, Emily, Ryan, Ruth, Toni and Nishan.

I have learned so much about my own happiness during the time that I've been working on this thesis and one of the things that I've learned is the importance of *sangha* (or community) in my life. I'm grateful to have been a part of several amazing *sangha*, one of which has played several important parts in the process of writing this thesis. If it weren't for the encouragement of Beatrix and Pancho at Nong Khai Alternative Centre in 2007 I truly believe that I would have passed quickly through Laos on my first visit and that, subsequently, this PhD would never have happened. Their yoga centre and the beautiful neighbouring Mut Mee guesthouse on the banks of the Mekong have often been a sanctuary for me and many of the people that I've met there have become like a second, international, family.

In Edinburgh I am deeply grateful to my two supervisors Professor Kay Tisdall and Dr. Neil Thin who have not only provided invaluable guidance and remarkable attention to detail but, maybe even more importantly, believed that I could finish the thesis when I didn't believe it myself. Similarly, to my colleagues and peers at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships – particularly Emma, Fiona, Mo, Fiona, Tania, Sarah, Andressa and Mary - who have listened when I vented my stress about happiness and provided advice over numerous tea-breaks and pub trips. I also thank the Economic and Social Research Council for making the whole project possible through their generous funding.

I am lucky to have truly extra-ordinary friends and family. Thank you to my siblings, Bill, Ann, Claire and Mary who supported me when I gave up a good job and took a chance on an uncertain return to academia. I've leaned on them all for practical and emotional help and I hope that they are a little bit proud of me in amongst thinking that I am a little bit nuts! In particular I'd like to thank my mum for never complaining (at least to me!) that I was missing Christmas at home again and encouraging me to do the things that I believed

would make me happy even when those things obtusely ended up involving a lot of tears a long way away from home. I am forever indebted to Voon, Hamish, Jane, Lyndsey, James, Elizabeth, Helen and all of their beautiful, wise, funny children for their incredible friendship, emotional support, practical support and good humour, both in terms of this thesis and way beyond it.

And then a third continent - the final edit of this thesis happened on a homestead in Swaziland. Thank you to Em and Sam who didn't think that I was completely mad when, having not spent more than a couple of hours with them for seven years, I suggested moving to their part of the world for, potentially, one of the more stressful periods of my life. It was a brilliant decision and I'm forever indebted not only for their support but also for introducing me to permaculture and inspiring me with the wonderful work that they do at Guba. Extra special thanks go to 2-year-old Lilly Njabuliso who made me laugh even when I wanted to throw it all up in the air and admit defeat.

There are many others, around the world. Facebook friends who sent a virtual smile, a kind word or a kick up the bum when I was struggling. All those people with whom I've shared rambling conversations about happiness or about Laos. Everyone who has travelled with me on one of the parallel journeys of yoga and meditation and personal development that I've walked over the past few years. Thank you all.

In closing I want to single out one person from the many.

Sombath Somphone is a man who I feel privileged to call a friend. Sombath disappeared from Vientiane on the 15th December 2012 in highly suspicious circumstances and has not been seen since despite huge international outcry. This case is mentioned in the thesis below, but I want here to make personal reference to Sombath as someone who, during a conversation in 2008, inspired the current research and who continues to inspire and challenge me. Sombath, you are not forgotten and your ideas continue to reach people around the world. I look forward with hope to a day when we will be able to sit down together and have another conversation about happiness.

Contents

Abstract.....	2
Declaration.....	4
Acknowledgements.....	5
List of Acronyms.....	13
List of Figures.....	15
Introduction.....	16
Why I find myself writing this thesis, now: A few personal reflections.	17
Organisation of this thesis.	18
Chapter One: Happiness; the theoretical context.....	21
Introduction	21
What is happiness?.....	22
Happiness in time and place: finding ways to negotiate the theory	27
Happiness and Policy	31
Subjective Indicators	34
Quality rather than quantity.....	38
Happiness across borders and cultures.....	41
Buddhist concepts of happiness	42
Happiness in changing times	44
Happiness, globalisation and young people	45
Conclusion.....	48
Chapter Two: Laos, Lao civil society and young volunteers in Vientiane.....	49
Introduction	50

Laos: a brief historical context.....	51
Laos, being Lao and questions about national identity	55
Urban Laos/Rural Laos	58
Laos: a changing country	60
Happiness Research in Laos.....	62
Civil Society in Laos.....	67
Youth Volunteering in Laos	73
What is volunteering?	75
Why volunteer?	76
Volunteering and happiness	77
Conclusion.....	79
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	80
Introduction	82
Research Questions and Values	83
A post-positivist research paradigm.....	84
Methodology	88
Fieldwork	90
Changing plans.....	90
Research Participants	91
Research sites.....	92
Phonsinuane Volunteer Group (PVG)	93
Dongsavat Children and Youth Development Centre (DC&YDC).....	95
Research Methods	97
Participant observation	98
Conversations and interviews	102
Participative research workshops.....	104
Ethics	110
Over-arching principles and practice.....	111

Confidentiality	113
Consent.....	116
Equity and participation	118
Learning Lao language and working with an interpreter.....	118
Data Management and Analysis	124
Conclusions	127
 Chapter Four: Expressing Happiness.....	125
Introduction	128
Happiness or <i>kwaam-suk</i> ?	129
Translating words	136
<i>Mii-kwaam-suk</i>	139
<i>Dii Jai</i> :	140
<i>Poom jai</i>	140
<i>Sabai jai</i>	141
<i>Seung</i>	143
<i>Muan</i>	144
Metaphors for happiness	146
Three conceptual models of <i>kwaam-suk</i>	149
Conceptual Model 1: Becoming Happy	151
Conceptual Model 2: Being Happy.....	153
Conceptual Model 3: Happy being with others.....	155
Three models making up a whole structure	156
Conclusions	158
 Chapter Five: What young volunteers say make them happy.....	157
Introduction	160
Identifying the themes	160

Themes that equally relate to ‘being happy’, ‘becoming happy’ and ‘happy with other people’.	166
Having a warm family:	166
Being a volunteer	169
Themes that emphasise ‘becoming happy’	172
Having a high education:	172
Having money to use well	174
Being able to follow my dreams	176
Themes that emphasise ‘being happy’	178
Having good health	178
Being jai yen (cool-hearted)	179
Being able to do the things that I like	181
Emphasising “Happy Through Being With Others”	181
Having good friends:	181
Having a person who I love and who loves me:	183
Being able to help other people	185
Happiness in the interactions between the themes?	186
Conclusion	188
 Chapter Six: Three happiness scripts that young volunteers share	 187
Introduction	190
Happiness Scripts	190
Happiness Script 1: “The way to be happy is to be a good Lao person.”	192
Vignette 1: The way to be happy is to be a good Lao person.	196
Happiness Script 2: “I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life.”	203
Vignette 2: I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life.	205
Happiness Script 3: “I am happy when I follow my heart”	209
Vignette 3: I am happy when I follow my heart	211

Vignette 4: I am happy when I follow my heart.....	212
Conclusion.....	218
 Chapter Seven: Examining the scripts.....	217
Introduction	220
When life doesn't live up to the script.....	222
Overlapping and multiple scripts	230
Being a dutiful child	231
Teaching Dharma.....	233
Sabai	236
Multiple scripts.....	237
Is some happiness more 'real' than other happiness?	239
Conclusion.....	251
 Chapter Eight: Conclusions.....	250
Introduction	253
Returning to the research questions and values.....	254
What do the ways that young Lao volunteers in Vientiane express happiness tell us about the ways that they conceptualise happiness?	254
What do young Lao volunteers in Vientiane say makes them happy?	255
What beliefs do young volunteers in Vientiane have about happiness?	256
Happiness Script One: The way to be happy is to be a good Lao person.	256
Happiness Script Two: I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and to have an easy life.	256
Happiness Script Three: I am happy when I follow my heart.	257
How do these beliefs about happiness fit with young volunteers' expressed experiences of happiness?	258
Implications for theory	260
Implications for policy and practice?	261
Implications for future research:.....	265

Returning to young Lao volunteers in Vientiane. 267

Reference List.....265

Appendix One: List of interviewees.....279

Appendix Two: Interview questions.....281

Appendix Three: Overview of workshops.....282

List of acronyms

ADB – Asian Development Bank
AEPF – Asia-Europe People’s Forum
ASEAN – Association of South-East Asian Nations
ASEM – Asia-Europe Meeting
CI – Co-operative Inquiry
DCDC – Donkhai Children’s Development Centre
DC&YDC - Dongsavat Children & Young People’s Development Centre
GDA – Gender Development Association
GDG – Gender Development Group
GDP – Gross Domestic Product
GNH - Gross National Happiness
GPGI – Global Person-Generated Index
HDI – Human Development Index
HPI – Happy Planet Index
IFAD – International Fund for Agricultural Development
INGO – International Non-Governmental Organisation
Lao PDR – Lao People’s Democratic Republic
LHD – Learning House for Development
LPRP – Lao People’s Revolutionary Party
LPRYU – Lao People’s Revolutionary Youth Union
LYN – Lao Youth Network
NEF – New Economic Foundation
NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation
NPA – Non-Profit Association
OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OWB – Objective Well-Being

PADETC – Participatory Development Training Centre

PL – Pathet Lao

PVG – Phonsinuane Volunteer Group

PWB – Psychological Well-Being

RLG – Royal Lao Government

SWB – Subjective Well-Being

UK – United Kingdom

UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund

UNV – United Nations Volunteers

US – United States

WFP – World Food Program

WTO – World Trade Organisation

UNV – United Nations Volunteers

List of figures

Figure 1: overview of numbers of young volunteers participating in fieldwork activities..	98
Figure 2: photo showing "Gross National Happiness" depicted in a mural designed by young Lao volunteers in Vientiane	131
Figure 3: What research participants say make them happy organised by the predominant conceptual model.	166
Figure 4: overlapping happiness scripts.....	231

Introduction

People want to be happy. However, the academic question of what happiness is is one that has occupied and eluded philosophers for centuries and, more recently, psychologists, economists, anthropologists and sociologists have added their own concerns, insights and methodologies to answer the same question. Internationally, interest in the importance of happiness as a possible indicator of progress and as a goal of social and development policy is increasing. One concern, however, is whether academics, policy makers, and people living their everyday lives are all talking about the same thing when they use the word happiness and, indeed, whether that matters.

I suggest in this thesis that happiness is both a critically important and a slippery concept at individual and policy levels. Understanding what people mean when they use the word ‘happiness’, or a word that is translated as happiness, is vital in order to enable us to have meaningful shared conversations about the concept of happiness. To this end, I argue that rich qualitative data that engages with complex and multiple perceptions of happiness in people’s every-day lives is vital. This thesis outlines one such research project looking at the perceptions about happiness of one specific group of people: Lao young people who volunteer with local civil society groups in Vientiane, Laos. The research process aims to explore the individual and shared ways that young Lao volunteers experience and understand happiness with a view to considering the implications of these findings for policy promoting happiness.

Considering happiness within and across different cultures is particularly important and challenging in a rapidly changing world. This particular group of young people occupy an unusual position in a diverse and rapidly changing country, simultaneously influenced by a complex political legacy, a rapidly modernising capital city and a newly visible civil society. Drawing upon data from a combination of participant observation, interviews and participative workshops conducted over a period of approximately 18 months of fieldwork

in Vientiane, this thesis provides a detailed discussion of the multiple ways in which research participants conceptualise happiness, the factors that they consider most important for their happiness and the normative scripts that they follow about how to be or become happy.

Why I find myself writing this thesis, now: A few personal reflections.

My professional background is as a youth participation development worker, working with young people whose views, opinions and agency were often not valued by the various adults who had influence and/or power in their lives. My most recent full-time job was in the mental health field and, through that post, I became aware of the academic field of positive psychology. I was working with many young people who struggled with serious mental illness and yet who, in the activities that we did together, revealed themselves also to be variously strong, capable, fun, engaging, determined creative human beings. I started to think that maybe we focused too firmly on the struggles in their lives rather than looking for the positive aspects of their lives which they, with support, might be able to nurture and grow.

I also have to set this in the context of my own struggles with my emotional health. I was first diagnosed with depression aged 19 when I was in my first undergraduate year of University. Alongside leading a full life and building a successful career, I have often experienced low moods and periods of anxiety. I have been lucky enough to have extraordinary support from family and friends and have worked hard to develop my own strategies to maintain my own emotional health and happiness.

Aged 33 I decided to go back to university, largely because I needed to create space in my life for reflection about my own values and life direction. I also decided that, before I started my MSc. programme, I would go travelling for 7 months – something that I had wanted to do since my late teens. I do not really remember why I chose to travel to Asia,

but I do remember making a detailed schedule of how I was going to see as much of Asia as possible in 7 months.

In March 2007 I arrived in Laos for the first time and I remember being taken aback by how ‘at home’ I felt and wanting to stay longer. I ripped up my schedule and ended up staying in Laos for several months, getting more and more fascinated by the place, the people and my interactions – as a tourist - with the place and the people. Like many other people before me Laos had gotten under my skin and, after I got back to the UK and started my MSc., I decided to do my dissertation project in Luang Prabang, looking at young people’s perceptions of the impact of tourism on their wellbeing, thus combining my interests in young people’s views, subjective wellbeing and tourism in Laos. Inevitably what I uncovered from this project were more questions than answers. I started to unpick the complexities and challenges of doing participative fieldwork in a culture and language that is not my own. The research participants did not perceive that tourism had a big impact on their wellbeing, but instead the interviews provided glimpses into the confusing multiplicity of ways that these young people understood their own wellbeing. And so the beginnings of a PhD proposal was born...

Organisation of this thesis.

The first three chapters of this thesis provide the context to the research. In Chapter One I outline relevant theoretical literature related to the study of happiness and to the international policy context which is increasingly moving beyond the sole use of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a measure of social progress. In particular, I examine the value of subjective life evaluations in policy. I argue a consideration of happiness is important for development policy and that qualitative accounts of happiness are vital in order to develop policies that reflect the lives of the people that they aim to benefit. Chapter Two moves the focus to Laos and provides a historic and contemporary overview of this fascinating country which is often overlooked by both academics and journalists. In particular, this chapter focuses on existing happiness research within the country and the link between

happiness and Lao civil society, offering some specific context regarding the increasing visibility and challenges of Lao civil society and the field of youth volunteerism in Vientiane. In this chapter I suggest that young volunteers with civil society organisations in Vientiane, the participants in the current research, occupy an unusual position in a diverse and rapidly changing country, simultaneously influenced by a political legacy, the rapidly modernising capital city and the newly visible civil society. Chapter Three provides a methodological outline of the research including the values and questions that underpin the current research and an outline of the research process including fieldwork, ethical considerations, working with interpreters and analysis.

Chapters Four to Seven present and discuss the findings of the current research. Chapter Four looks at the ways that young Lao volunteers in Vientiane express happiness and identifies three common conceptual models that they use to represent the abstract form of happiness. Chapter Five uses these three conceptual models to organise the eleven most common answers to the question of what is most important for young volunteers' happiness. These eleven themes were identified in collaboration with research participants and demonstrate the content of happiness for young Lao volunteers in Vientiane. Chapter Six demonstrates how these concepts and themes combine with beliefs about happiness into shared normative scripts about the ways to act in order to be or become happy. Three such 'happiness scripts', repeatedly followed by research participants, are identified, their origins discussed and the ways that they impact upon young volunteers' lives explored. Chapter Seven looks at the importance, at both individual and policy levels, of examining and challenging these socially constructed happiness scripts¹. In conclusion, Chapter Eight draws together the findings from the previous four chapters in order to summarise the answers to the research questions and present the implications of the current research for theory, policy and practice. The thesis ends by returning to the young Lao volunteers in

¹ Sections of Chapters Six and Seven have been published in a paper entitled "Learning the Scripts: An exploration of the shared ways in which young Lao volunteers in Vientiane understand happiness" (McMellon, 2013).

Vientiane and considering the impact of the research process and implications of the research findings in their every-day lives.

A detailed discussion of the challenges related to translation is given in Chapter Three. For the purposes of this thesis, quotations are translated into English and any particularly ambiguous or unfamiliar words or phrases are discussed. Where Lao language words are used, these have been transliterated into Latin script. Since there is no agreed standard method for transliterating Lao script, an intuitive approach has been used, prioritising consistency and taking account of existing literature where appropriate.

Chapter One: Happiness; the theoretical context.

Introduction

Happiness is both a vital and a slippery concept that has occupied the minds of thinkers and researchers across centuries and across academic disciplines. That happiness is such an important consideration of people in their lives means that it is necessary to engage with these challenges and debates. This chapter gives an overview of the literature relating to theories of happiness and, in particular, their relevance to policy. It argues that a consideration of happiness is important for development policy and that qualitative accounts of happiness are vital in order to develop policies that reflect the lives of the people that they aim to benefit.

In particular, the chapter outlines:

- Challenges related to defining happiness and to knowing whether people are talking about the same concept both within the same culture and, particularly, across different cultures.
- The theoretical concepts of time and location as they relate to happiness and as lenses through which different conceptualisations of happiness can be examined and communicated.
- The reasons why a consideration of subjective experience is increasingly considered important in policy development, and international examples of where such consideration is currently taking place.
- An examination of the challenges and limitations of subjective indicators and a consideration of alternative, qualitative, approaches to considering happiness in policy.

- An overview of happiness research across different cultures in the context of a rapidly changing world, with particular reference to the impact that globalisation may have upon young people's happiness.

What is happiness?

This thesis starts with two assertions. Firstly that people want to be happy. Secondly that subjective experience is important because it affects quality of life. Although it may not be the *only* thing that people want in their lives, there is broad agreement in the literature that, across cultures, people do want to be happy (see, for example, King and Napa, 1998; Diener et al. 2003; King and Hicks 2006). Indeed, King and Broyles (1997) found that happiness is one of the three most common wishes that people have for their lives. Veenhoven (2002) supports the second assertion, above, when he argues that the ways in which people think and feel about life makes a difference to their quality of life. He points out that two people can have the same life circumstances and yet experience their life very differently because of different priorities and values. Kesibir and Diener point out that there are objective advantages to promoting happiness stating that “happiness precedes and causes a plethora of positive outcomes, instead of merely being the product of those positive outcomes” (2008:121).

Happiness is, however, an extremely slippery concept. Nietzsche said that an “individual(’s) happiness springs from one’s own laws unknown to anyone” (as cited in Wienand 2009:114). Invoking a sense of absolute subjectivity, Nietzsche sees happiness as fundamentally incomparable between people; we all have a sense of what we mean by happiness, but that sense is each individual’s own and we can never know if we are talking about the same thing. However, more recently the growing multi-disciplinary academic field of happiness studies has sought simultaneously to acknowledge the importance of positive subjective experience and to demonstrate that there are enough patterns and commonalities between people’s understandings and experiences to allow meaningful dialogue about happiness (see, for example, Diener and Suh, 2003).

Such meaningful dialogue, however, has many challenges. The language used in the academic literature is often contradictory and confusing. ‘Subjective wellbeing’, ‘psychological wellbeing’, ‘quality of life’ and ‘happiness’ are sometimes used synonymously and sometimes used to signify distinct concepts. Two different authors may use the same term to refer to concepts that are not identical. This is further complicated by the fact that the same terminology is often used in everyday language where words such as happiness, satisfaction and wellbeing are used and understood very differently by different people and, indeed, by the same person at different times.

Feldman (2010) identifies a difference between questions relating to the form of happiness (what is happiness?) and questions relating to the causes, or content, of happiness (what makes people happy?). He suggests that many people confuse these questions and attempt to answer the former question by listing possible answers to the latter question, when in reality both questions are important because, if we want to know how to become happier (either individually or as societies) then we need to understand the nature of happiness (2010: 108). Similarly, Soni suggests that a lack of understanding and clarity about the nature of happiness has resulted in its near exclusion from public and political arenas (2010:9). Establishing what we are talking about when we talk about happiness is, however, a challenge that stretches far back in time and across many different academic disciplines. A full overview of the literature is not possible within the limitations of this thesis but it is necessary to draw attention to some of the relevant differences and distinctions in the ways that happiness has been conceptualized.

Kesebir and Diener (2008) suggest that even the idea that subjective experience is central to the concept of happiness could be a contemporary and cultural assumption. They argue that, at different times and in different places, happiness has variously been about either ‘feeling good’ or ‘being good’ and suggest that if happiness is ‘being good’ then the individual themselves may not necessarily be the best judge of what will make them happy (p. 118). Griffin (2007) discusses the question of whether happiness is subjective or objective in terms of whether judgements of value (objective) or taste (subjective) are

prioritised, but ultimately argues that the distinction is not useful since “one cannot here distinguish the identification of what is to be responded to and the response to it” (p. 144). It is a subjective response to something of value that gives it value and, similarly, I argue that even if happiness is in being virtuous or good, even if the judgement about what virtuous or good is comes from outside the individual, there is still a subjective reaction to this judgement. This thesis therefore, whilst arguing against the absolute and incomparable individual subjectivity of Nietzsche, starts from an assumption that happiness is subjective - concerned with perceptions, beliefs and understandings.

Discussion about virtue leads back to a fundamental philosophical debate in happiness studies, with its roots in ancient Greek philosophy, which distinguishes between *hedonism* and *eudaimonism* - both words commonly translated in English as ‘happiness’. *Hedonism*, however, perhaps more accurately translates as ‘delight’ or ‘pleasure’ whereas *eudaimonism* is also commonly referred to as ‘flourishing’ (see, for example, Buckingham 2012). The distinction between *hedonism* and *eudaimonia* can be framed in several different ways. Raibley (2012) makes a distinction between “episodic happiness” which he calls “the property of feeling happy at a time” or “feeling happiness” (p. 1108) and “deep or robust happiness” which he describes as “happiness as a life goal” (p. 1109). In this distinction “episodic happiness” equates to hedonism and is related to feeling happy in a short time frame whereas “deep or robust happiness” is more closely related to *eudaimonism* and is related to cognitive judgments about happiness over a longer period of time. Oishi et al. (2013) suggest a distinction between, firstly, happiness that is in the control of the individual and therefore requires active pursuit (*hedonism*) and, secondly, happiness that happens to the individual, relating to having good fortune² or being blessed (*eudaimonism*) (p. 560). The word *eudaimonism* has its roots in the Greek phrase *eu daimon* which can be translated as “good demon” and here Oishi et al. interpret this as

² The root of the English language word *happiness* being *hap* meaning *luck*.

meaning that the person is blessed to have a good spirit looking out for them (2013: 5). However, an alternative interpretation of the word *eudaimonia*, by Waterman et al., suggests that it “proposes that the goal of human functioning is to live in a manner consistent with one’s daimon or true self, where the daimon represents one’s best potentials” (2008: 42). This is contrasted to “hedonic pleasure” which is defined as pleasure gained from having material good and opportunities for action and where the aim is to maximise this pleasure (2008: 42). Finally Ryan et al. (2008) make a distinction between *eudaimonia* as living well and *hedonism* as feeling good. This distinction, they suggest, reveals a structural distinction in the two concepts since *hedonism* is focused upon the outcome of pleasurable feelings whereas *eudaimonia* focuses upon the process of living a good life (2008: 140).

This complex and contested distinction has been further developed by academics in the field of positive psychology and Simsek (2009) describes two important distinct models aimed at operationalising happiness. Simsek describes “subjective wellbeing” (SWB) as focusing on “hedonic elements of life such as positive affect, lack of negative affect, and life satisfaction” whereas “psychological wellbeing” (PWB) focuses on “the eudaimonic dimensions of growth, meaning and direction” (2009:506). Simsek makes a further distinction between SWB and “emotional wellbeing” which is made up of only the affective elements of SWB, namely maximizing positive affect and minimizing negative affect (2009:506).

Oishi et al (2013) suggest that “Ed Diener (1984) advocated the use of the scientific term *SWB* as opposed to happiness precisely because of the ambiguities associated with the term *happiness*” (p. 559). When cultural and linguistic differences are introduced into this picture the topic becomes even more complicated since the question is introduced of how it is possible to translate happiness across language and cultural experience (see, for example, Wierzbicka 2004). However, I argue that the use of the term ‘Subjective Wellbeing’ either represents an assumption that a particular conceptual form of happiness applies to the way that all people think about happiness or is different to the everyday use of the word

‘happiness’. Therefore, in this thesis I return to the word happiness because the thesis has young people’s everyday experiences at its core and, even taking into account linguistic differences, the word happiness is familiar to many of the research participants whereas other academic terms are not.

Glossary: a guide to terms used in this thesis.

As described above, many terms used in this thesis have been problematized and debated within the academic literature. With a recognition of this, the following glossary outlines how I choose to use some of these common terms.

Wellbeing: a broad assessment that life is going well that includes life circumstances, activities, abilities and experiences. This assessment includes aspects that are both objective and subjective.

Quality of Life: whilst several authors have attempted to conceptually untangle ‘wellbeing’ and ‘quality of life’ (see, for example, Langlois and Anderson, 2002) the terms are broadly interchangeably in the literature. Therefore, in this thesis, the term ‘wellbeing’ is used unless referring to a specific source that uses the term ‘quality of life’.

Happiness: the subjective aspect of wellbeing. The experience of feeling and thinking that life is good, the conceptualisation of which may be different across individuals and cultures.

Subjective Well-being (SWB): a specific conceptualisation of the subjective aspect of wellbeing associated with positive psychology characterised by maximising positive affect, minimising negative affect and maximising life satisfaction.

Life satisfaction: a cognitive assessment of whether or not life is good.

Happiness in time and place: finding ways to negotiate the theory

As discussed, any theoretical consideration of happiness is complex and it is, therefore, necessary to find some way to frame the discussion. This section explores the connections between happiness and time and between happiness and place which are used as theoretical lenses and organising structures throughout this thesis.

Simsek suggests that the happiness studies literature currently lacks a theoretically constructed model for assessing happiness that takes account of the context within which these assessments are made, resulting in “conceptual fuzziness because it is unclear exactly what the construct refers to” (2009: 507). The conceptual model of Ontological Well-being outlined by Simsek (2009; Simsek and Kocayoruk 2013) takes a narrative approach to happiness, suggesting that the context in which such evaluations are made is that of a “whole life project” which can only exist within a temporal framework of the past, present and future. Within this model “people are considered as time travelers who construct the past and future into the present by taking into consideration their own trajectories as growing individuals” (Simsek 2009:511). Individuals are, therefore, active agents who construct their own happiness through the stories that they tell about themselves over time (Simsek and Kocayoruk 2013:310).

The relationship between time and happiness and the different ways that time is constructed across different cultures has been considered by many academics. Seligman and Pawelski (2003: 160) consider subjective wellbeing to include thoughts and feelings about the past (such as contentment, satisfaction), the present (such as pleasure, joy) and the future (such as trust, hope). Based on this temporal aspect of happiness, Ho (2006) identifies three types of happiness: ‘prospective happiness’ (happiness based on looking to the future) ‘happiness in process’ (happiness based on the present) and ‘retrospective happiness’ (happiness based on looking to the past). It must, however, be remembered that these types of happiness cannot be considered in isolation from each other; for example, if I do something because I believe that it will make me happy in the future, in the present this same action might make me either happy or unhappy (for example, I may do it excitedly or grudgingly).

The concept of time is not, however, universal. The western world generally conceptualises progress through life as a linear progression through a series of developmental stages from infancy through childhood and adolescence to adulthood and old age - one finite life course with a beginning and an end. But this can be contrasted with concept of the life cycle, common in many Asian cultures, where a single life is part of a bigger and ongoing pattern of renewal (James et al. 1998:61; Kitayama and Markus 2000). In a finite life course time can be 'wasted' or 'cut short', concepts that make little sense if death ultimately leads either to rebirth or to nirvana. As Ratanakul explains, "death is considered an integral part of existence and is one phrase of this endless cycle and in no sense is death seen as terminating the cycle" (2007:234). The ways in which we think about time are, therefore, socially/culturally constructed to help us make sense of the world, and therefore impact upon how we think about and evaluate our lives.

The conceptual model of Ontological Well-being (OWB) (Simsek 2009) and the subsequent diagnostic Ontological Well-Being Scale (OWBS) (Simsek and Kocayuruk, 2012) have been developed as psychometric tools to be used to assess and measure an individual's happiness. In the original paper the conceptual model of OWB was underpinned by two central concepts of time and knowledge and was operationalized using a 2x3 format where both cognitive and affective evaluations are made of past present and future happiness (Simsek 2009: 515). However, in the more recent paper, building on the work of Nussbaum (2001), the problematic nature of the distinction between thoughts and feelings about happiness is acknowledged with a recognition that "feelings towards an object inevitably include an individual perspective to it" and, thus, the different types of knowledge that affect happiness assessments no longer have a central place in the model (Simsek and Kocayuruk 2013:312). The updated OWB model, therefore, focuses on affective evaluations since they are considered necessarily to contain cognitive evaluations and is operationalised as "the affective evaluation of life stories, containing the past, present and future dimensions" (Simsek and Kcayoruk 2012:337).

The aim of this thesis is substantively different to that of Simsek and Kocayuruk (2009; 2012) since I seek not to measure happiness but, instead, to understand the ways that young people make assessments about happiness. Therefore while Simsek and Kocayuruk state that, in order to achieve a model that takes account of subjectivity, they “did not focus on the ingredients of the life project” (2012:315), it is these very ingredients, and the mix of the ingredients, in which I am interested. In addition, Simsek’s focus is upon individual lives engaged in “private project(s) of becoming” (2009: 512). However, I suggest that this individual focus is at least partly cultural and, in order to take into account Buddhist ideas about happiness outlined below on p. 41, that this focus could be expanded from ‘being’ to ‘inter-being’ - from individual stories to shared stories. Further, in line with King and Hicks, I suggest that, both simultaneously and across their lifetime, individuals often experience ambivalence and multiple narratives and potential narratives (2006: 123).

Simsek and Kocayoruk (2013) acknowledge several limitations of their research so far and give suggestions for future research including the need for more qualitative research to examine the idea that people assess their lives as a temporal whole life project and the need for research in different cultural contexts to identify whether the needs and values necessary in order to give a positive evaluation of this whole life project vary across cultures. The research upon which this thesis is based provides rich data from young volunteers living in an urban Lao cultural context and I suggest that the temporal nature of happiness can be used as a theoretical lens through which to view the current research findings.

A second conceptual lens which can help to unpick the theoretical complexities of different understandings of happiness is the *location* of happiness in relation to the individual. The location of happiness operates at three interconnected and yet different levels:

- Where is the object of the happiness located?
- Where is the motivation to do the thing that is perceived to cause happiness located?
- Where is the knowledge about what will cause happiness located?

The first two of these levels indicate a distinction made about what it is that someone thinks will make them happy and why they think that it will make them happy. Nussbaum explains this in terms of the “object” of the emotion and the “salience” of the emotion, stating that “emotions always involve thought of an object combined with thought of the object’s salience or importance” (2001: 1). The object that people perceive makes them happy can include many different kinds of objects including material things, circumstances, relationships, achievements, attitudes and spiritual faith. A further distinction can be made as to whether these objects of happiness are internal or external to the individual who experiences the happiness, in other words whether the happiness happens from the ‘inside-out’ or from the ‘outside-in’ (Biswas-Diener et al. 2012). Drawing upon Buddhist ideas of happiness discussed below, another way of making this distinction is to consider whether the object of happiness is sensory or based upon self-awareness and attention to the nature of reality (Ekman et al. 2005: 60).

Self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 2008) looks at an individual’s motivation for acting and distinguishes between two different types of motivation, extrinsic motivation where the action is instrumental to achieving some other desired outcome and intrinsic motivation where the value of the action cannot be reduced to other values or outcomes. The third level of the location of happiness relates to the location of the knowledge about happiness – in other words does the individual make autonomous decisions about what will make them happy or does someone else determine what they must do in order to become happy. Ryan et al. (2008) suggest that other people can tell an individual how to achieve *hedonic* pleasure but not how to achieve *eudaimonia* since *eudaimonia* relates to the individual becoming, through a process of reflection and self-awareness, their own best self.

This thesis sits at a nexus between happiness, Laos, young people and development policy. The connections between happiness and time and place repeatedly emerged as a useful framework throughout the research process, when reviewing the existing literature, conducting fieldwork and analysing the data. Therefore, in discussing the ways that

research participants perceive happiness and the things that make them happy, this thesis repeatedly returns to the theoretical lenses of ‘time’ and ‘place’ as ways to organise thinking about happiness.

Happiness and Policy

Theories of happiness are not only of relevance to individuals but also to groups of people and increasingly to policy-makers at both Government and organisational levels. It has been argued that social policies are essentially policies that promote the wellbeing of citizens and that, therefore, to study social policy is to study how wellbeing is conceived by the society and/or by the state. In this view social policy concerns how goods and services have the potential to impact upon quality of life and how ‘quality of life’, is understood and differs across time and across different contexts (Alcock, 1998). Therefore defining wellbeing “is not only of theoretical interest to researchers but also has substantial applied significance. If one aims to develop interventions one has to know what the target is.” (Ryan et al. 2008: 141)

A distinction can be made between the end goal of social development policy and the means that we employ to get to that goal. Policy concerns such as education, governance, employment, health and economic growth can be viewed as ends in their own right or as instrumental means to an end goal that is related to people having more positive experiences of life. If it is the latter, there are challenges associated with understanding what it means for people to have positive life experiences and with comparing these experiences, both within and across different contexts. There is a growing literature looking at different ideas as to exactly what this end goal might be conceptualised (Sen 1999; Abddallah et al 2009; Johnson 2004).

Schimmel (2009) argues that social policy and development have historically focused upon the reduction of poverty (and by extension the acquisition of financial wealth) as a means to improve quality of life. This raises several problems. Firstly, it implies that acquiring

wealth will necessarily improve people's quality of life, and yet there is extensive evidence that, at least after basic needs are met, money is not always one of the key determinants of happiness. This is true both with reference to personal wealth or income (i.e. if a person has or earns more money than they previously had or earned they will not necessarily, controlling for other variables, be happier) (Kasser 2006; Lane 2000) and with reference to GDP (i.e. people living in countries with high GDPs are not necessarily happier than those living in countries with lower GDPs) (Abdallah et al. 2009). There have been numerous studies suggesting examples of cultures where, on average, people live in relative poverty and yet report higher levels of happiness than those where, on average, people live in relative wealth (Rojas 2004; Abdallah et al. 2009). Conversely events that common-sense suggests may negatively impact upon subjective wellbeing – such as natural disasters, crime and divorce – can sometimes impact positively upon GDP (Kasser 2006). Therefore, policies that purely promote economic growth make an assumption about increased wealth that is not always upheld by experience or evidence. Secondly, the idea that wealth acquisition equates to improved quality of life usually assumes that wealth only includes financial wealth and fails to take into account traditional ways of life where interactions – such as goods and/or services - may not pass through the market (Schimmel 2009: 99). Promoting this idea therefore not only fails to take into account the value of this non-cash economy in people's lives but suggests that increasing your market share is the way to improve your life. There is also increasing evidence that a tension between long-held traditional values and new market values – or indeed between values and actions – can potentially lead to psychological distress, or cognitive dissonance, which in turn may decrease quality of life (Kasser 2006)

In response to increasing thought and evidence suggesting that economic growth alone is not a sufficient indicator of development, in 1990 Mahbub ul Haq developed the Human Development Index (HDI) upon which the United Nations Development Project bases its annual Human Development Reports. The HDI is an aggregate measure of three objective development indicators, life expectancy, levels of education (as measured by literacy rates and school enrolment) and standard of living (as measured by GDP). Sen (2000) points to

the rapid acceptance that the HDI gained in its first decade of use and suggests that the HDI's key contribution to debate about the goals of development is not the specific aggregated measure but the philosophical stance that it is possible for development to have multiple coexisting goals. Questions remain, however, regarding the selection of the specific indicators used by the HDI. Schimmel (2009) suggests other indicators that could contribute important information to an understanding of wellbeing such as work, security, social relationships and psychological factors including extraversion.

The Human Development Index is inspired by the capabilities approach to development, which argues that the end goal of development is ensure that people have the capability to have the things in their lives that increase their wellbeing (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). Initially this approach included entirely objective capabilities, but latterly there has been discussion about how subjective capabilities could be included in the approach and some theorists have argued for a capability for happiness amongst other capabilities (Johnson 2004). Historically, and in other approaches, happiness takes a more central position. Soni (2010) illustrates that for Aristotle the end goal – or highest good – is happiness and “happiness is the guiding and orienting idea in the realms of ethics and politics” (p. 17). A focus on happiness as the goal that individuals and societies strive towards was also fundamental to many western Enlightenment thinkers, but Soni argues that a failure to operationalise the concept effectively resulted in it being challenged and ultimately neglected in the nineteenth century.

More recently, the concept of Gross National Happiness was introduced to Bhutan in 1972 and serves as an evaluative framework for all public policy decisions consisting of 4 pillars, 9 domains and 72 happiness indicators. This operationisation of happiness is, however, controversial, not least because it takes little account of the subjective experience of Bhutanese people, but it does demonstrate the possibility of a role for happiness in guiding policy (Rinzin et al 2006). Other governments have undertaken investigations into alternative measures of progress to GDP and the consideration of subjective assessments in policy development. In 2008 The French Government commissioned the “Commission on

the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress” (Stiglitz et al. 2009), which sought to identify the limits of GDP and alternative approaches to measuring economic performance and social progress. In the UK, the Office for National Statistics’ programme “Measuring National Well-being” includes subjective indicators looking at ‘personal wellbeing’. When Bhutan, in 2011, put forward a resolution to the UN suggesting that GDP “was not designed to and does not adequately reflect the happiness and wellbeing of people in a country” and inviting countries “to pursue the elaboration of additional measures that better capture the importance of the pursuit of happiness and wellbeing in development with a view to guiding their public policies”, it was adopted unanimously by all of the member states (UN General Assembly 2011). This resolution paved the way for a UN High Level Meeting in April 2012 looking at “Happiness and Wellbeing: Defining a New Economic Paradigm” and the publication of the first World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al. 2013). In a chapter within this report, Hall (2013) looks specifically at the connections between the Human Development approach and an approach that places subjective experience at the centre of development. He finds that the two approaches complement each other, demonstrating broad correlation between them, but suggests that an approach that combines both objective and subjective factors is key since “it is usually people’s own perceptions of the state of the world rather than other measurements – or perceptions – of the “facts” that drive individual behaviour” (2013: 139). Whether happiness is the entire end goal, one part of the end goal or, indeed, how people want to feel on the way to the goal, it is necessary to understand what happiness means and find ways of knowing what could be done to promote happiness or the capability to pursue happiness.

Subjective Indicators

As seen in the initiatives and programmes outlined above, the most common way to consider progress towards a policy goal tends to be the use of quantitative indicators. Many of these programmes are responses to the prevalent sole use of one particular indicator of progress (GDP) and Stiglitz et al. remind us of the importance of carefully informed

decisions about which indicators should be considered: “What we measure affects what we do; and if our measurements are flawed, decisions may be distorted” (2009: 7).

Stiglitz et al. (2009) and Hall (2013) conclude that indicators used to consider progress should include both objective and subjective measures. Veenhoven (2002) agrees that objective wellbeing indicators only provide part of the picture and explains this conclusion by pointing to the situation where two people can have the same life circumstances yet experience their life very differently because of different priorities and values. Researchers have argued that a consideration of subjective indicators allows a more accurate and nuanced understanding of objective measures (Schimmel, 2009; Camfield et al., 2009). Schimmel (2009) describes how an understanding of subjectivity allows for the possibility that objective indicators are more complex than is first apparent and that a higher score is not automatically better. For example he suggests that, while there is evidence that basic levels of education tend to increase happiness, higher educational levels can increase aspirations, offer more potential for social comparison and, if employment opportunities do not match educational attainment, increase frustration – all of which are detrimental for subjective assessments of wellbeing (p. 102). He also suggests that indicators cannot show the bi-directional nature of the relationship between happiness and objective wellbeing indicators; increased education may make life better, but equally feeling good may make it more likely that an individual will have educational success.

However, whilst Veenhoven (2002) and Schimmel (2009) argue that using subjective indicators to measure quality of life would both complement the use of objective wellbeing indicators and help us to understand the value and limitations of objective indicators, there are conceptual problems concerning exactly what such indicators would measure and practical concerns about their reliability.

Firstly there is a conceptual question of definition and terminology. As discussed, terminology in these academic fields has been used ambiguously, and is repeatedly debated and problematized. Where subjective indicators are used it is particularly vital to establish a shared understanding of what exactly is being measured. Subjective indicators are often

referred to as subjective wellbeing indicators, which may reflect a broad view of happiness as the subjective element of wellbeing or may reflect the specific model of positive subjective experience in positive psychology which is called subjective wellbeing. Since subjective indicators do not necessarily measure subjective wellbeing but instead measure whatever the individual being questioned understands by whatever word is used in the question being asked (often happiness or satisfaction in English language) I use the broad phrase 'positive subjective experience' when referring to these indicators.

Secondly, Veenhoven (2008) highlights the need to distinguish between the questions "how happy are you?" and "what does happiness mean to you?" or "how do you evaluate the level of subjective wellbeing in your life?" He suggests that in order to think about his second question we should consider what is going on in our mind when we assess our own happiness. Different individuals will consider different aspects of their life (e.g. different life domains such as work, family, living conditions, or values and meaning in life) in different orders of priority and different aggregations when they answer the question "how happy are you?" It has been argued (see, for example, Torras, 2008) that this makes 'whole life' indicators useless and that subjective indicators should therefore be domain-based, but this solution may not always be practical and, in any case, does not answer the question of which domains we should ask people to assess. Griffin (2007:140) suggests that "one's life is happy if one is content that life has brought one much of what one regards as important", which suggests that, in order to attempt to know what makes people happy, we need to understand the values and meanings that people think are important in their lives. The challenge therefore is not simply to measure wellbeing but to understand the complex interplay of factors that contribute to an explanation of what it means when someone says that their life is good or bad.

Sociology and social policy have, however, historically been generally sceptical of the need to take account of subjective experience in order to inform our understanding of the social world and the policies that are developed. Veenhoven (2002) suggests that there are two main misgivings about the use of positive subjective experience in policy – firstly that

subjective wellbeing is a ‘matter of the mind’ that is impossible to compare between individuals, and secondly that positive subjective experience can only be accessed by self-reporting, which is fundamentally unreliable.

Misgivings based upon the incomparable nature of ‘matters of the mind’ play upon a misconception that positive subjective experience is both experienced individually and that it is the individual who holds the responsibility for promoting their own happiness. Subjective experience therefore is considered to have little cultural or social relevance (Veenhoven 2002). As discussed below (see p. 40) there is, however, extensive research to show that people within a particular culture tend to share a similar understanding and experience of happiness and/or subjective wellbeing (see, for example, Diener and Suh, 2003; Selin and Davey, 2012). Such research opens the possibility that policies, informed by better understanding of perceptions and experience of happiness in particular cultures and across cultures, can promote wellbeing.

Misgivings about the self-reporting aspect of positive subjective experience are concerned primarily with validity and reliability (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977). The concern is that individuals may not have thought clearly about the things that make them happy, therefore leaving self-reports “imprecise and vulnerable to distortion” (Veenhoven, 2002: 7). There is, indeed, evidence to suggest that individuals are not always good at accurately predicting what will make them happy (see, for example, Wilson and Gilbert, 2005) and it is vital, therefore, to be clear about what information is provided by the self-report. People’s understandings of happiness are relevant independently from their precision since these perceptions affect people’s feelings and actions (Hall, 2013; Nussbaum, 2001). Whilst Weirzbicka acknowledges that there are challenges related to self-reporting, she succinctly states that “surely, as far as the quality of people’s inner experience is concerned, their own testimony is more valid than any arguments that a theoretician could come up with” (2003: 579).

Quality rather than quantity.

The complexity of these issues lends itself to the possibility that reducing happiness to quantitative indicators could be considered both crude and unreliable. Stiglitz et al. state that “what we measure affects what we do” (2009:7) but there is a further issue that requires consideration: *whether* to measure. An alternative route for those arguing for the consideration of happiness in policy is, rather than arguing for the reliability of quantitative subjective indicators, to offer an alternative qualitative approach. Kitayama and Markus (2000) suggest that survey methodology is inadequate to address the nuances of subjective wellbeing and advocate for future research which provides “thorough and dense descriptions of the lived world of the people under study, and then by bringing this cultural knowledge to bear on the theories and methods developed to test those theories” (2000:153).

Torras (2008) argues that, not only are quantified accounts of subjective wellbeing unreliable, but that they attempt to disguise the fact that they are always essentially subjective. He suggests that subjectivity necessarily exists not only in the experience of wellbeing but also in the decisions regarding which indicators to use to measure wellbeing and in the decisions regarding the ways that such indicators are aggregated. Quantified indicators of subjective wellbeing hide both the richness of the experience and the reasons for these decisions, thus reducing the experience and obscuring exactly what it is that they are measuring. Rather than aiming for an (inevitable) illusion of objectivity, Torras (2008) suggests that policy needs to find ways to take subjectivity and quality into account and should be informed by a nuanced and qualitative discussion about the realities of people’s everyday lives.

One possible way that policy can begin to take account of the holistic quality of happiness is through paying attention to accounts of people’s lived experience. Abu-Lughod argues that attention needs to be paid to the particular complex and contradictory circumstances of individual lives since people are “going through life agonizing over decisions, making mistakes, trying to make themselves look good, enduring tragedies and personal losses,

enjoying others and finding moments of happiness” (1991: 158). She argues that it is important to express these day to day realities since “the language of generalisation cannot convey these sorts of experiences and activities” (1991:158). Measuring subjective experience necessarily involves generalisation and, therefore, Abu-Lughod’s position is mirrored by Reason and Rowan’s statement:

There is too much measurement going on. Some things which are numerically precise are not true; and some things which are not numerical are true. Orthodox research produces results which are statistically significant but humanly insignificant; in human inquiry it is much better to be deeply interesting than accurately boring. (1985: xiv)

Carefully chosen stories and words can, therefore, offer us a glimpse into the possibility of “a different structure of thinking about the meaning and value of human life” that is difficult to convey through indicators and numbers (Soni 2010:31). Narrative accounts provide us with a completely different kind of knowledge to indicators about human and social experience. Soni argues that “the interest and value (of narrative) lies in the entirety of the structure of the idea, the interconnectedness of its various parts, its embeddedness in a particular socio-institutional context, and the significance that structure entails for human life” (Soni 2010: 32). As opposed to measurements that are frozen in a particular moment of time, stories take place across a period of time and always have a beginning a middle and an end (McCormack 2004: 223). Abu-Luhgod argues that this introduction of time is important since it “keeps us fixed in flux and contradictions” which are central to the everyday experiences of people’s lives (1991: 157).

Stories and narratives make possible a consideration of both the diversity and commonalities of peoples’ lives and their experiences. In research conducted in Australia looking at the stories that young people tell about their wellbeing, Eckersley et al. (2005) discuss how young people use the stories that they tell in order to “make sense of their lives and identities” and “negotiate a complex social world” (p. 26). The report goes on to

discuss the origins of and connections between individual stories and shared stories, stating that

Personal stories, then, are understood as not only the representation of unique lives but as also in part social conversations and storylines that arise out of specific social experiences and settings. (p. 27)

Script theory traditionally focuses upon the shared stories that people have acquired about how they, and other people, should act in particular situations. Ableson (1981: 717) describes scripts as socially constructed “expectation bundles” that provide rich information about the reasons that people behave in the ways that they do and, since scripts are socially constructed, they are different in different cultures (Meng: 2008). Other authors have argued that groups of people also hold socially constructed scripts that influence their expectations about particular emotional experience. Russell (1989) argues that an emotion can be broken down to a sequence of events that follow a script giving the following, one might argue culturally specific, example: “In happiness, one desires something, gets it, feels pleasure, smiles, and, perhaps, feels kind towards others” (p. 303). Wierzbicka (2003) suggests that people from different cultures are educated by a variety of different influences to experience emotions differently. In a later article she describes how different cultures possess different cultural scripts that explain how people understand emotional experience and argues that, in order to compare emotions across languages and cultures, we need to develop an awareness of the shared ‘cultural scripts’ that groups of people use to talk about emotions (Wierzbicka, 2004)

The intersection between how policy actually works and the theoretical arguments for how it ‘should’ work are rarely comfortable. I understand that there are practical and pragmatic reasons why quantified and aggregated information often takes priority and I am not naively suggesting that time-consuming and expensive qualitative research should always take the place of current surveys. However, I would argue that, in order to make progress towards the end goal of happiness, firstly policy needs to find structured ways to take account of whole-life stories and rich narratives and secondly that, where it is appropriate and/or necessary to use large-scale surveys and indicators, that these indicators should be

informed by a rich understanding of cultural subjective wellbeing as advocated by Kitayama and Markus (2000) and that such an understanding must be grounded in the subjective everyday experiences of the people whose quality of life social and development policies aim to improve.

Happiness across borders and cultures

So far much of the discussion about happiness as a consideration in policy has largely occurred within the context of a single country or as an abstract shared value across different countries. However, extensive research has been undertaken looking at happiness in different nations (see for example, Diener and Suh, 2003; Selin and Davey, 2012; Veenhoven 2012) and there are several indexes which seek to measure and compare happiness levels across different countries. UNICEF (2007) identifies six domains of wellbeing, five of which were concerned with objective measures of wellbeing and the sixth being subjective wellbeing, where children were asked to evaluate their own health, school life and personal wellbeing. The ‘scores’ for the six domains are presented both individually and as an aggregated measure of child wellbeing. The report commissioned by the French Government (Stiglitz et al., 2009) resulted in the development of OECD’s Better Life Index³ which provides an online tool enabling the comparison of different domains of wellbeing, including a subjective measure of ‘life satisfaction’, across different countries. The New Economic Foundation’s (un)Happy Planet Index (2009) moves away from consideration of economic growth and seeks to measure sustainable wellbeing by aggregating measures of the overall wellbeing of populations (operationalised as “Happy Life Years” which includes the objective measure of life expectancy and the subjective measure of life satisfaction) and the country’s resource consumption. By bringing together

³ <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/> (Accessed: 14th August 2014)

human development and environmental concerns for sustainability, the (un)Happy Planet Index refers us back to the temporal aspect of wellbeing, although this time at a generational rather than a personal level. Human wellbeing (both objective and subjective) is important, but it is not acceptable to maximise happy life years in the present at the expense of the potential happy life years in the future.

There are, however, additional challenges associated with comparing happiness across different cultures. Triandis argues that, while a sense of ‘the good life’ is something that people consistently strive towards across cultures, the factors that predict happiness vary (2000:15). This is supported by a study by Kitayama and Markus (2000) who find that among American college students general positive emotions are correlated (either positively or negatively) with specific emotions that relate to the self as independent (such as pride and anger) while among Japanese college students general positive emotions were correlated with specific emotions that relate to the self as interdependent (such as feelings of close connection and guilt). Oishi et al (2013) suggest that collectivist cultures might equate happiness with external conditions whereas individualist cultures may tend to look inward to locate happiness (p. 561). Nitnitiphrut (2007) argues that the form that happiness takes across cultures also varies outlining how, in contrast to the subjective wellbeing model, in Buddhist cultures wellbeing is based on the three dimensions of Buddhist Economics (self, mind and environment) and emphasises the aim of eliminating suffering through the avoidance of desire and attachment.

Buddhist concepts of happiness

As with any religion, Buddhist teachings are interpreted in many different ways and practices carried out in the name of Buddhism do not always fit comfortably with these teachings (see, for example, Watts 2009). Specific links between Buddhist teachings, Buddhist practice and happiness in Laos as they relate to the current research are considered in Chapter Six, from page 189. However, it is useful here to give some brief overview of Buddhist teaching as it relates to happiness.

Happiness as spiritual enlightenment in Buddhism (and also other eastern religions such as Daoism) seems to contrast starkly with ideas of happiness emerging from the Enlightenment in the west which focus upon the possibility of knowledge and morality which are not dependent upon any deity or religion. Angel makes a distinction between “Enlightenment East” which centres on the “pursuit of mystical awakening” and “Enlightenment West” which focuses upon “the humanistic pursuit of social and individual well-being, justice and scientific rationalism” (1994: 3). Expressed this starkly it seems difficult to see how these two approaches could even communicate and yet Angel (1994: 3) argues that both of these approaches locate the possibility of happiness in an intrinsic knowledge of how the world is, where knowledge can be gained either through scientific reasoning or through wisdom and direct experience.

Buddhism is ultimately concerned with the attainment of spiritual enlightenment, a state associated with freedom from suffering (which is always caused by attachment and desire) that marks the ending of the cycle of death and rebirth (Watts 2009). The Pali word *sukha*, (and from which the Lao word *kwaam-suk* derives) is often translated as ‘happiness’ but also as ‘pleasure’ or ‘bliss’. The *Dharma* acknowledges the existence of material happiness but considers this happiness far less important than that happiness which is characterised by the absence of suffering (*dukkha*) and results from the relinquishment of desire, as Buddha exclaims in the *Udana* 2:2:

Any sensual bliss in the world,
any heavenly bliss,
isn't worth one sixteenth-sixteenth
of the bliss of the ending of craving. (translated by Bikkhu and Degraaf 2012:
38)

In an article written as a collaboration between eastern Buddhist scholars and western scientists, Ekman et al. (2005) define *sukha* as “an enduring trait that arises from a mind in a state of equilibrium and entails a conceptually unstructured and unfiltered awareness of the true nature of reality” (p.60). While material and/or sensual happiness may be available

to the majority of people it is short lived, whereas *sukha* derived from a lack of attachment to desire is an exceptional and enduring state that is generally reached as a “result of sustained training in attention, emotional balance, and mindfulness, so that one can learn to distinguish between the way things are as they appear to the senses and the conceptual superimpositions one projects upon them” (2005: 60).

This Buddhist conceptualisation of happiness has similarities with Aristotelian *eudaimonia* since both place value in ethical action towards the fulfilment of true nature. However, in contrast to the end goal of individual flourishing, Buddhists believe that this true nature is a collective nature and that “the separate self with a unique soul is a delusion and a fabrication of craving” (Swaris 2009: 40). Ratanakul suggests that in Theravada Buddhism (the ‘school’ of Buddhism widely practiced in Laos), what people perceive to be self is actually an “unbroken line of causes and effects” following the laws of *karma* (2007:235). Enlightenment is an awareness of the absolute interdependence (or ‘inter-being’) of all things and in that awareness all separations and dualities cease to exist. The path to enlightenment is, therefore, an “interdependent struggle of all beings to attain liberation” (Watts 2009: 30). In this non-dual view of the world the theoretical academic distinctions drawn above to help conceptualise happiness essentially dissolve. Happiness is both the end goal of enlightenment and the actions that are taken towards that goal; individual action is indistinguishable from collective change in the world (Loy 2009: 237).

Happiness in changing times

Cultures have, however, never been static and do not adhere neatly to national borders. This is even less the case in the current period of rapid globalisation as a result of, for example, increased international trade, media, tourism and digital information (Giddens 1999). Buddhism, or indeed any other religion, is practiced by people in their day to day lives in ways that are very different from the way that is expressed in its theological teaching and in ways that are fluid and responsive to changing lives and culture. Whether for positive or negative globalisation is changing the sociocultural contexts in which people live and, Arnett argues, how they think about themselves in relation to this context (2002).

Globalisation has the potential for seemingly conflicting effects of increasing the potential for commonalities between people across cultural divides and of promoting local pride in cultural difference (Giddens 1999). Larson (2002) warns against losing sight of the importance of local culture when observing increasing commonality and in particular he cautions against assuming that an increasing aspiration to a “shared material lifestyle” necessarily means that people’s values and beliefs are changing: “What is emerging across the world are postmodern assemblages of local and global elements combined in different and changing ways” (2002:3).

Appadurai (2000) warns, however, that academic and professional discourses of globalisation can exclude the lived experiences and concerns of the people most affected. He identifies the emergence of a new form of “grass-roots globalisation” centred upon the experiences, needs and visions of ordinary people and groups of people, but suggests that such a movement, although “profoundly involved in the social transformations sweeping their own societies” does not have a voice that is recognised on the international stage upon which globalisation is observed and debated (2000: 14). Appadurai suggests that such a movement of globalisation from below based upon people’s daily lives provides an opportunity to build an “international civil society” based not upon limited geographical areas but upon shared concerns and newly imagined solutions (2000: 3).

Happiness, globalisation and young people

The way that adults think about ‘childhood’ and ‘youth’ are related to social and cultural norms (Prout 2005; Fass 2003). Fass (2003) illustrates this using the example of attitudes towards children working. In times and places where children’s contribution to the economy is necessary and valued children working may be viewed as positive, but in modern western cultures children’s value is in the emotional satisfaction that they bring to their family, they are viewed as completely separate from the economy and it is either considered that children have a right not to work, or that a child’s work is schoolwork. Arnett (2002) suggests that youth was formally a minority world cultural construct, but that

globalisation, and in particular extended schooling, has seen the spread of youth (as a transition between childhood and adulthood) across the globe.

Constructions of childhood also change over time. In the western world childhood has historically been considered to be important primarily as an apprenticeship for adulthood but James and Prout (1997) trace the emergence of a new paradigm in the sociology of childhood which moves away from a focus on children as future adults ('becomings') to children as active agents in their own lives ('beings'). Similarly, studies of child wellbeing have, until recently, focused on measuring the future 'outcomes of childhood' or "wellbecoming" rather than the experience of children's wellbeing 'as a phase of itself' (Ben-Arieh et al. 2001). However, Prout (2005) subsequently points out that being/becoming is a false dichotomy since all humans (of any age) are constantly and simultaneously both being and becoming. Others have argued that the focus upon being and becoming is itself cultural and tends to focus upon the individual child without taking full account of the context within which the child lives and the relationships that are important in his/her life (Tisdall and Punch 2012). This need to consider children's social relationships has led to some researchers moving beyond the duality of 'being' and 'becoming' to an extended typology that includes 'being', 'becoming' and 'belonging' (Haw 2010; Sumsion and Wong 2011). Sumsion and Wong examine the 'belong' element of "Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia" and conclude that belonging is more than a "pleasantly alliterative platitude" and instead "holds potential for radical transformation of early childhood settings" (2011: 38).

Giddens (1999) argues that globalisation requires both societies and individuals to focus upon the future in a new way. Increasing research looking at the subjective reality of young people's lives suggests that young people are presently active in imagining (Edmond 2009) and inventing (Henderson et al 2007) their futures. Edmond's article detailing an ethnography of children living in a state orphanage in Cambodia is called "I Am All about the Future World" mirroring a key theme in her study that children themselves prioritised their future lives over their present lives (2009). These hopes, fears and aspirations are born

out of young people's current experiences and circumstances; "in a sense the present provides the resources from which these imaginings of the future are made possible" (Henderson et al 2007:28). However, Tisdall and Punch (2012) caution that, while there is ample evidence that children have the potential to be active agents in constructing their lives, their specific circumstances may limit this potential (p. 256).

Globalisation brings increased choice, which is often seen as positive, but can be unsettling because it creates the possibility that we might make the wrong choice (Pittman et al. 2002; Schwartz 2005). Giddens uses the concept of 'risk' to show how societies and individuals attempt to negotiate through this unsettling uncertainty by looking for ways to calculate the probable future consequences of our actions and decisions (1999:22). In contrast, he argues, traditional societies tend to emphasise the past, continuing paths that have long been followed and looking to gods or prior-established fate for explanations when things go wrong. Where traditional cultures may be rooted in continuing doing the things that work well and managing hazards in familiar ways, the new global culture is predicated upon the idea of progress or a belief that "the future will be better than the past" (Cole and Durham 2008).

Furthermore, the increased choices that globalisation promises are not consistently realised - either across the world or within nations - and there is, therefore, the potential danger of a mismatch between young people's aspirations and their experience. Schlegel suggests that one impact of globalisation for young people is "dreams of possibilities that cannot be met in reality" (2000: 82). Ray (2003) introduces the concept of an "aspirations window" containing the influences that affect our aspirations, and suggests that globalisation opens this window wider to new influences. While this can be positive, it is also potentially dangerous: "the aspirations window *must* be opened, for otherwise there is no drive to self-betterment. Yet it should not be opened too wide: there is the curse of frustrated aspirations" (Ray 2003:4).

However, at the same time as globalisation pushes us to focus on the future, the future potentially becomes less stable. In her research on children's lives in Sudan, Katz finds that

the world was changing so quickly that “children were not being prepared for any future that they were likely to face” (2004: xii). This concern is mirrored by Larson (2002) who suggests that there is a risk that the preparations that young people make towards adulthood fail to match the reality of adult lives. Pais (2003) suggests that a modern globalized world makes a linear projection into the future impossible. He argues that young people’s lives are “increasingly maze-like...guided by metamorphosis, multiplicity and reversibility” (p. 115) and that the anxiety created by this lack of ability to project into the future means that while young people may think about the future they live their lives increasingly in the present – resulting in the period of delayed adulthood that has been discussed by authors such as Arnett (2002) and Cote (2000).

It seems that globalisation changes how children and young people experience and think about their lives. The increased acknowledgement of both children and young people’s agency and the diverse, changing lives that they face makes the challenge of listening to children and young people’s own accounts of their wellbeing increasingly vital (Crivello et al., 2009; Hill et al., 2004).

Conclusion

Happiness is considered to be vitally important in people’s own lives and yet establishing a common definition of happiness is challenging. This chapter has outlined how an increasing understanding that progress is about more than increasing GDP has seen policy makers consider alternative assessments of progress including subjective assessments of happiness. However, in order to consider happiness in policy it is necessary to have meaningful conversations about happiness and such conversations, within cultures and across cultures, are challenging when different people have different understandings about the concept that they are discussing.

In order to make sense of the diversity of happiness, the suggestion is made to use the lenses of time and location. The relationship between time and happiness hinges upon the

distinction between past happiness, present happiness and future happiness. The location of happiness includes the location of the perceived object of the happiness as internal to the individual, external to the individual or in the relationships between two or more people. The location of happiness also pays attention to whether the motivation for action is intrinsic or extrinsic and, relatedly, whether the knowledge about what will make the person happy comes from inside the individual or from an external source. I suggest that these two lenses can be used as a framework to examine the ways that people perceive happiness in their daily lives.

An argument is made that, while currently the most common method used to include a consideration of happiness in policy is through quantitative subjective indicators, qualitative data and analysis are necessary to understand fully the meanings and importance of happiness in people's everyday lives. It is argued that such qualitative data is both intrinsically important and important as a means to make informed decisions about the use of quantitative indicators. Therefore, qualitative research that aims to provide a rich and deep understanding of the ways in which people understand and experience happiness in their everyday lives is critical for any meaningful consideration of happiness in policy.

Finally, the chapter examines the particular challenges of understanding happiness across cultures and across a rapidly changing world. I suggest that globalisation affects the ways that adults think about children and young people and that children and young people may be particularly susceptible to changing perceptions of happiness. I, therefore, suggest that using the lenses of time and location in order to examine the ways in which young people in a rapidly changing social context perceive happiness may provide rich qualitative data that contributes to meaningful conversations about international happiness and policy.

Chapter Two: Laos, Lao civil society and young volunteers in Vientiane

Introduction

Whereas the previous chapter provided the theoretical and policy context to the current research, this chapter provides an historical and social overview of Laos, and particularly its capital city Vientiane, where the research is located. The chapter sets out the case as to why young volunteers in Vientiane are a particularly interesting group of participants with whom to conduct in depth qualitative research about happiness.

In particular the chapter provides:

- A historical background to Laos including an introduction to cultural, political and religious influences upon the research participants that will be returned to throughout this thesis.
- A consideration of the current social context of Laos and particularly Vientiane, including the impacts of globalisation.
- An overview of the limited existing research about happiness in Laos and in the region of Isaan in the northeast of Thailand, which is culturally similar to Laos.
- A discussion of Lao civil society, from where most of the current happiness research emerged and elements of which seeks to promote models of development that include a consideration of happiness.
- A particular focus upon youth volunteerism in Lao civil society. The current research is located within Lao civil society organisations that work with young Lao volunteers and these volunteers are the research participants. I therefore offer some

context to their volunteering activities and argue that these volunteers occupy an unusual position in a diverse and rapidly changing country, simultaneously influenced by a complex political legacy, a rapidly modernising capital city and a newly visible civil society.

Obtaining, however, even the most basic up-to-date social statistics about Laos in order to provide a context to this study is challenging. Reliable statistics are often not available and, where they are available, become out of date quickly as a result of the rapid change in the country (Pholsena and Banomyong, 2007). While there is growing academic research carried out in Laos there is limited research focusing on young people and particularly young people's perspectives. In this chapter I, therefore, review both the existing academic literature and also 'grey' literature including professional reports and media articles.

Laos: a brief historical context

In order to understand the context within which this research takes place it is necessary to have some awareness of the disjointed and volatile trajectory of the recent history of Laos, with a particular focus upon the capital city of Vientiane. Such an awareness can help to understand the complex interplay of different influencing factors that continue to affect young people's lives in Vientiane to this day, including:

- Multiple and fluid Lao identities including particularly the distinction between Vientiane and the rest of the country
- The legacy of civil war
- Socialist and Buddhist ideologies
- Rapid globalisation

Much has been written about so-called "mandala states", common historically across south-east Asia and characterised by a central core in which the political power was concentrated and which exerted varying levels of control over a flexible and ever changing "constellation of more distant provinces and smaller kingdoms" (Askew et al., 2006: 23; Scott 2011). The

history of the region now known as Laos is a history of such mandala, known in Lao language as *meuang*. The word *meuang* can be used to denote various levels of political territory from *city* to *nation* and therefore reflects the flexibility of the mandala concept, referring to both the overall kingdom and its smaller constituent parts. *Meuang* also, however, implies far more than simply geographical or even political reach, pointing to a set of relationships characterised by a clear hierarchy that includes a sense of mutual obligation centred in a strong sense of community. The most famous of the historic *meuang* was Lan Xang⁴, founded by King Fa Ngum in 1353, who is also credited with the introduction to and popularity of Theravada Buddhism in the region. The kingdom of Lan Xang was larger than the current nation of Laos, incorporating much of the now Thai region of Isaan. In 1560 the site of the royal capital of Lan Xan was moved from Luang Prabang to Vientiane, possibly reflecting Vientiane's advantages as a trading post. However, in the late seventeenth century, after a series of disputes related to succession, *Meuang* Lan Xang was split into three smaller separate *meuang* centred around the cities of Luang Prabang in the north, Champasak in the south and Vientiane in the centre (Askew et al. 2006).

In the subsequent century the leaders of Vientiane *meuang* became embroiled in complex machinations and conflicts with and between the kingdoms of Siam and Burma, ultimately resulting in the destruction of most of the city by Siamese troops in 1827. It is possible that the region would still be ruled by Thailand to this day if French colonialists had not considered control of the Mekong River vital to their vision for the region (Askew et al. 2006). The details of French colonial control were formalised in the Franco-Siamese treaty of 1893 when the borders were fixed and the three Lao *meuang* were reunited into the colonial nation-state of Laos with its capital in Vientiane. French colonial rule in Laos lasted until the Second World War, but French attention was focussed upon its other

⁴ Meaning "land of a million elephants".

colonies of Vietnam and Cambodia; Laos received only minimal investment and Lao infrastructure benefited little in this time. The French administration tended not to value or trust native Lao workers and so there was an influx of Vietnamese civil servants to Vientiane brought in to fill administrative roles (Askew et al. 2006).

After a period of Japanese occupation during World War Two, Laos was declared independent. After a very brief period of rule by Lao Issara, a loose coalition of Lao nationalists, the Royal Lao Government (RLG) was formed in 1947, initially with continued significant French political involvement and support. Askew et al. (2006) however, suggest that the RLG never had full control of the whole country because of “the combined obstacles of limited resources, a difficult geography, and persistent political and military conflict” (p. 111). What followed was the most turbulent period of Lao history as the country found itself caught up in devastating civil war and international conflict between the US and communist forces across the region. During this difficult period, two different views of Lao independence were represented by the RLG (supported by France and subsequently the United States) and the Lao Issara Party (who, after a series of incarnations, became the Pathet Lao (PL) and allied themselves more and more closely with the Viet Minh in Vietnam).

The Geneva Convention in 1955 had effectively marked the end of French involvement in the region and the space provided was filled by the United States (US) who saw Laos as a strategically important buffer in their war against communism and pumped huge amounts of aid (up to \$70 million per year, mostly targeted at military and security services) into the country with a focus on Vientiane. Laos’ economy was unable to deal with the increased money flowing into its system and the result was rapid inflation, corruption, the emergence of a Lao elite who lived almost exclusively in Vientiane and growing inequalities, both within Vientiane and between Vientiane and the rest of the country. Askew et al. describe Vientiane at this time as “a bustling, brash, corrupt city on the frontier between the United States and its communist enemies” (2006: 112). The US aimed, with some success, to turn Vientiane into a modern city by stimulating a consumer culture and market economy that

they hoped might spread to the rest of the country. On the other hand the PL, whose support came mainly from outside of the city, used Vientiane to illustrate the corruption and vice against which they were fighting.

Meanwhile, across the country and region the war raged on. The impact of this conflict was vast; between 1963 and 1973 official US figures show that 2,093,100 tonnes of bombs were dropped on Laos, the majority in the north-eastern province of Xieng Kuang, which borders with Vietnam, and one third of the population became internal refugees (Pholsena, 2012). Faced with a humiliating defeat in Vietnam, the US began their withdrawal from the region in 1973 and in 1975 the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), the political party emerging from the PL movement, took power in Laos and declared the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). Members of the PL, many of whom came from ethnic minority groups from the rural northeast of the country, viewed Vientiane with both hostility and suspicion (Askew et al. 2006). Their priority for the city was to impose a "socialist morality" that focused on 'the new socialist man' as the product of the revolution (Pholsena and Banomyong 2007:157). Kaysone Phomvihane, the Chairman of the Central Committee of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and first Prime Minister of Lao PDR, declared that the new socialist man should be "filled with patriotism, love for socialism, and socialist internationalism, working in accordance with the principle 'one for all and all for one'" (cited in Askew et al. 2006: 162). In practice this imposition consisted of suppressing the most excessive consumptions and corruptions of the US funded society and the PL closed the nearby border with Thailand (who were perceived as allies of the west), choosing to trade instead with their socialist allies in Vietnam and the Soviet Union. In response, the international community withdrew the aid that had been maintaining the previous regime. By 1985 it has been estimated that between 10 and 15% of the Lao population had left the country and the majority of these were from the western-educated urban elite based in Vientiane (Thalemann, 1997).

The Pathet Lao faced huge challenges implementing a unified socialist state and, by the late 1970s, it became apparent that many traditional Marxist policies, such as collectivisation,

were unworkable in the specific Lao context (Pholsena 2006). After 1976, gaps between ideology and practice became apparent and the Buddhist and traditional village ways of life were allowed to continue largely unaffected by the communist political system (Rehbein, 2005; Thalemann, 1997). Increasingly, the LPRP implemented policies moving towards a market based economy, a direction that was formalised at the 1986 Party Congress with the implementation of the New Economic Mechanism, which is considered a significant turning point in the country's history marking the abandonment of socialism in all but name. This direction was underlined by the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy in 2003 (Askew et al. 2006; Pham 2004).

The move towards Laos as a market economy moved Vientiane back into the spotlight as the “motor for national development” in the country (Askew et al. 2006: 186). In the last 25 years, the wider regional context has changed significantly: Vietnam's thawing relationship with China has opened up possibilities for an increased investment and assistance from China to Laos; Thailand lifted trade restrictions with Laos in 1990 and the majority of Lao trade is now with Thailand; Laos joined the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997 and in 2012 Laos was admitted into the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The current government rhetoric is of a move from Laos from being ‘land-locked’ to being ‘land-linked’. The aim is to reinvent Laos as a strategic transport hub in the centre of the region and as the “battery of South East Asia” referring to the country's potential to exploit its natural resources, and particularly the Mekong, in order to produce energy to export to neighbouring countries (see, for example, Case 2011). These proposals are controversial since there is widespread concern about the environmental impacts of the plans and doubt that they will improve the lives of Lao people (see, for example, Lawrence, 2009).

Laos, being Lao and questions about national identity

Evans (1999) suggests that a fundamental problem in academic writing about Laos is the lack of attention paid to the idea that, as implied in the turbulent history outlined above, ‘Laos’ itself is not a stable concept. He draws our attention to the problematic distinction

between “Laos as a state and ... the Lao as an ethnic group” (Condominas 1970, as cited in Evans 1999:4) and suggests that the modern world continues to “unreflexively think in national units” (Evans 1999:5). Yet, just as there have been repeated political attempts to draw a clear history of a Lao nation, there have also been repeated academic attempts to draw attention to the problems with such attempts, pointing to the high number of ethnic groups in the region (see, for example, Pholsena, 2002), the historic lack of clear national boundaries (see, for example, Scott, 2011) and the high proportion of the ethnic Lao population that live outside of the current national borders (see, for example, Indavong, 2009).

The ‘national unit’ that is currently officially named The Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and commonly referred to by its inhabitants as Laos is located in the centre of the geographic area often referred to as the Indochinese peninsular and is bordered by, from the north moving clockwise, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar. The country’s seventeen provinces and one municipality (Vientiane Capital City) cover a diverse geographical area that is often divided into three regions, the harsh mountainous north, the midland plateaus and the southern lowland floodplains (WFP 2007: 49), which roughly correspond to the three historical Lao kingdoms, or *meuang*s.

Ethnicity and the large number of different ethnic groups that live within the Lao borders continues to be a contentious and complex subject, which has led many writers to suggest that Laos can be characterised more by a collection of culturally diverse tribes than by any congruent and cohesive national culture (Evans 1999: 1). In day to day life many of the people that I met in Vientiane still refer to the three ethnic groups that were introduced under the French colonial system and which refer to the geographical characteristics of the three historical *meuang* in which the groups tended to live: upland (Lao Soung), midland (Lao Theung) and lowland (Lao Loum). As Evans, however, points out, this distinction is both inaccurate and serves to “entrench the centrality of the ethnic Lao to the definition of Laos” (1999:7). The Lao Government now officially recognises 49 distinct ethnic groups (and 240 sub-groups), although in reality there are not always clear distinctions between

different groups who can be distinguished in different ways (e.g. language, culture, location) (IFAD 2012). The recognition and inclusion of different ethnic groups was an important factor in the success of the Pathet Lao, although Rehbein (2007:96) argues that one impact of globalisation has been the strengthening of minority cultures and that this has threatened the current government, prompting policies such as resettlement that seek to increase government control over the whole population.

With reference to ethnicity, the term Lao accurately refers to the largest ethnic group which sits within the Lao-Tai linguistic group and the Lao Loum group using the geographic distinction outlined above. Accurate and up-to-date statistics regarding the prevalence of different ethnic groups are difficult to access, partly as a result of confusion related to the different ways of identifying ethnicity. IFAD (2009) suggests that 68% of the population is from the Lao Loum ethnic groups. King and van de Walle (2010) use a distinction between Lao-Tai and non-Lao-Tai, demonstrating that people from the Lao-Tai group are more likely to live in Vientiane and less likely than people from the non-Lao-Tai groups to experience a range of social disadvantages.

However, using the word 'Lao' in a narrow manner to refer to a specific ethnic group or sub-group is also problematic. As mentioned above, the Lao Government recognises 49 different ethnicities but only one nationality – Lao – (IFAD 2012) and when people self-identify as Lao, this is often an indicator of nationality rather than of ethnicity. The term 'Laotian' is sometimes used by foreigners to indicate nationality in an attempt to clarify this distinction but Evans (1999:6) points out that this word is one that has been imposed from colonial powers and therefore represents a different oppression. Whether or not they are aware of the subtleties of these dilemmas, I have never heard a person from Laos of any ethnicity refer to themselves as, or indeed use the word, 'Laotian' and therefore I do not use it in this thesis. In keeping with the usage by the majority of research participants, I use the word 'Lao' to refer to a national identity (however problematic) and the phrase 'Ethnic Lao' to refer to the ethnic group. Similarly, since I have rarely, outside of official contexts,

heard a Lao person refer to their country as Lao PDR, when I refer to the country in this thesis I use the name ‘Laos’.

Urban Laos/Rural Laos

Another key, although not unproblematic, characteristic of the country is the division in lifestyles between the urban centres, particularly Vientiane, and the majority of the population who live in rural areas and rely upon farming for their livelihood⁵. Askew and colleagues cite a French language source by Taillard, which argues that prior to colonisation urban and rural areas experienced a symbiotic relationship whereby urban areas were concentrated collections of villages “whose distinctiveness was marked by the presence of rulers, nobility and their recognisable ritual functions, legitimising symbols and institutions” (2006:22). The legacy of this system can still be seen in the way that cities are organized into ‘urban villages’ or administrative units. However, with colonisation and subsequent regimes including particularly the US backed RLG, the symbiotic connections between the two lifestyles have been severed and the urban lifestyle has become representative of all that is different from the rural areas including “foreign populations, private property, a distinctive residential configuration and the organisation of time separate from the traditional agricultural calendar” (Askew et al. 2006:22). Askew et al. further argue that, although in 1975 the new LPRP Government sought to impose upon the city a traditional socialist ideology of harnessing productivity and suppressing consumption, by

⁵ The 2013 World Development Report suggests that farming accounts for 67.6% of the total employment in Laos and made up 29% of the country’s GDP in 2012. These figures, however, do not reflect the high numbers of the population (in both rural and urban areas) that take part in farming activities in addition to other employment and the high levels of subsistence farming that forms an important non-cash economy across the country.

the late 1970s the LPRP had strategically chosen to emphasise the distinction between ‘bad’ Vientiane and the rest of the country.

It seemed to the Pathet Lao that Vientiane could also serve as a sort of revolutionary quarantine station, concentrating politically malignant influences there and protecting the rest of the country (Askew et al. 2006: 163).

In the latter years of the current regime, along with an increasing focus upon economic development, this distinction has become more positive and focus is once more upon Vientiane as a “motor for national development” (Askew et al. 2006: 185).

Despite Rehbein’s claim that “the capital of Vientiane is undoubtedly the ‘core of Laos in many respects’” (2007:9), the LPRP Government’s 2005 population census states that approximately 73% of the population live in rural areas (although, no definition is provided in order to clarify what is meant here by ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ areas). This is, however, down from 83% in 1995⁶ and UNICEF statistics suggest that the average annual growth rate of the urban population between 1990 and 2011 was 6%⁷ which represents an increasing rural to urban migration. This is not surprising since there is a widespread perception that life in the city is easier than life in the country and there is evidence that those living in urban areas have higher access to services and higher incomes (King and van der Walle, 2010, WFP 2007). However, a focus on rural poverty conceals the challenges represented by evidence that, as urban poverty increases and the urban Lao high society (colloquially known as ‘hi-so’) and middle classes grow as a result of more private business opportunities, “income inequality is higher in the Vientiane capital than the rest of the country” (WFP 2007:16).

⁶ http://www.nsc.gov.la/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=18&Itemid=19&limitstart=1 (Accessed: 29th July 2014)

⁷ http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/laopdr_statistics.html (Accessed: 29th July 2014)

Laos: a changing country

Despite the turbulent history outlined above, Askew and colleagues state that Laos in general, and Vientiane specifically, have generally been presented in academic literature and in the media as “backward, isolated and marginal both to its immediate region of mainland South-East Asia and to the world” (2006:2). There seems to be a general consensus that Vientiane is a ‘sleepy’ city and that Laos is not in any rush to change. Writing about Vientiane, the Asian Trends Monitoring Bulletin (2013) says that “one of the unique characteristics of the Lao people is their slow, laid back pace of life” (p. 16) and suggests that this “cultural quirk” leads to a low motivation for change and a high level of complacency with their current way of life. In 2005 Rehbein suggests that, in comparison to Cambodia, Laos has benefited from a slower and more controlled globalisation and implies that it is not wholly negative that many rural Lao had never seen foreigners, did not have access to television and when asked about material things that would make their lives better suggested “practical things for their peasant life, for example a fish pond or a small tractor” in contrast to Cambodians who wanted houses and cars (2005:6). Pham, on the other hand, views the slow rate of globalisation negatively and laments the fact that “the speed of systematic improvement in Laos lags behind the speed at which the outside world is changing”, suggesting further that policies aimed at supporting economic change were undermined by a lack of fiscal discipline and inefficient management (2004:9). Pholsena emphasises the Lao Government’s struggle between “socialist principles and the country’s integration into the capitalist economy” (2006:49).

By 2007, however, Rehbein’s message has changed slightly to say that change in Laos is happening “on a relatively small scale but at an accelerated pace” (2007:4). More recent evidence challenges the suggestion that Laos is changing (or modernising) more slowly than other countries in the region. Despite their suggestion that Lao characteristics might inhibit change, The Asian Trends Monitoring Bulletin (2013) points to Laos’ booming economy with a growth of 8% per year and Askew et al. (2006:186) point out that this growth is even higher in Vientiane than in the rest of the country; in 2005 the Vientiane economy grew by

11%. This growth translated to an increase in gross national income from US\$441 in 2005 to US\$853 in 2009 on the basis of which the authors of the report carefully comment that “the pace of Laos’ growth *seems* extraordinary” (p. 4, emphasis added). UNICEF statistics related to mobile phone usage and internet access across the country also paint a picture of rapid change. In 2011 87 out of 100 Lao people had access to the use of a mobile phone. Contracts were more than 100% suggesting that many people had more than one contract. In 2005, 0.9 out of 100 Lao people had access to the internet whereas by 2011 this had risen to 9 out of 100 people with internet access⁸. However, as The Asian Trends Monitoring Bulletin goes on to emphasise, this economic growth and these lifestyles changes are not distributed equitably and do not have equal impacts upon all Lao people’s lives. This sense of unequal change is particularly strong in the media and an article in the Economist (2013) states boldly that “Vientiane is growing fast in the hands of a Communist kleptocracy whose members queue up on Saturdays in their big cars to cross the Mekong for a dose of shopping across the border”. As early as 1997, Thalemann describes Vientiane as a changing city, albeit also emphasising that the change is not equally distributed:

In Vientiane, the capital, a strict midnight curfew until recently curtailed activities after dark; now a handful of new discotheques remain jammed until the early morning hour. Black BMWs with tinted window shields glide through the city’s rush-hour traffic, followed by a back-up of bicycles, hawkers and cyclo-drivers trailing behind; and the roaring sound of motorcycle races fills the city’s wide boulevards late at night. But Laos’s new urban wealth easily obscures the fact that the country remains one of the world’s poorest. (1997: 86)

⁸ http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/laopdr_statistics.html#117 (Accessed: 10th July 2014)

In 2010, although the streets were relatively quiet after midnight compared to other Asian capital cities, it was difficult to believe that until recently there were no bars or nightclubs open into the early hours of the morning. In addition, gliding through the rush-hour traffic in Vientiane is no longer a possibility since the increased traffic levels, a common topic of conversation for Lao people in Vientiane, bring the inadequate roads to a virtual standstill twice a day. Reflecting on the UNICEF statistics above, during my time in Vientiane it was rare for me to meet a young person who did not have a mobile phone, although these varied greatly in functionality from very basic through to the latest iPhones and were a constant topic of conversation. Similarly the large majority of young people had access to the internet, either through their mobile phones or through public internet ‘cafes’, and social networking (particularly Facebook) was a common and important part of their lives.

Happiness Research in Laos

In 2010, UNDP’s Human Development Report included evidence on subjective wellbeing and painted a relatively optimistic picture of subjective wellbeing in Laos. Its sources suggest an overall life satisfaction score of 6.2 out of ten, with 91% of people saying that they are satisfied with their job (compared to 87% in the UK), 89% satisfied with their personal health (compared to 85% in the UK) and 80% with their standard of living (compared to 88% in the UK). Furthermore, 98% of people questioned said that they had a ‘purposeful life’ (as compared with 79% in the UK) but surprisingly, given common assumptions that European societies are more individual than Asian societies, only 81% say that they have a ‘supportive social network’ (compared to 96% in the UK) and only 43% say they are ‘treated with respect’ (compared to 90% in the UK) (UNDP 2010). Another key source of information about international subjective wellbeing is the Happy Planet Index (HPI) (NEF:2012) which ranks Laos 37 out of 145 countries (the UK was ranked 41, where 1 is best) with an HPI overall score of 49.1 out of 100 (compared to the UK’s overall HPI score of 47.9 out of 100). While the UK scored well on life expectancy and experienced wellbeing but poorly on ecological footprint, Laos’ score breaks down into a life expectancy of 67.5 and an experienced wellbeing score of 5.0 out of 10 (both of which

are rated amber or ‘middling’) and a carbon footprint of 1.3 global hectares (which is considered green or ‘good’).

These surveys, however, tell us little about what subjective wellbeing means for Lao people and it is therefore difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions from the data. There have been suggestions that high levels of satisfaction among the Lao population may not be entirely positive since it may inhibit development. In a 1959 conversation between two American diplomats, cited in Askew and colleagues, about the challenges of the American project to establish a market economy in Laos, a comment is made that

In many countries you will find that the people have a perfectly sound idea of what they would like to have. They just haven’t got the wherewithal to get it. We found in many areas of Laos they just didn’t know the things existed. There was no demand of any kind. They were completely content. (2006: 149)

Given the increases in access to foreign media, travel and international tourism, it would be difficult to argue that people living in Vientiane still do not know that other ways of life exist, and yet a similar argument based upon contentment is made in the 2012 Asia Monitoring Trends Bulletin “Vientiane Poor But Different” for contemporary challenges to development and change in Laos.

The final trend that we observed in this field is how content the people of Vientiane were with their lives. All of the evidence from our survey, interviews, and general observations suggest that people in Vientiane are satisfied with their quality of life and the level of government services that they receive. With all of these deficiencies in income opportunities and service provisions [previously identified in the report], this final trend is perhaps the most worrying. (2012:10)

The report goes on to observe that people in Vientiane have a “significant difference in perceptions about life difficulties” compared to inhabitants of other South-East Asian cities and to suggest that high levels of satisfaction could be one factor to inhibit development in Vientiane and Laos more generally. There is, however, some limited evidence that levels of happiness in Vientiane are increasingly falling behind those in rural areas. In 2005 Rehbein reported that people that he talked to in Laos (both in urban and rural locations) were

“overwhelmingly optimistic” about their country’s economic situation, but expressed (albeit tentative) dissatisfaction with the political situation (2005:9). By 2007 Rehbein reports a difference in rural and urban happiness “finding that only 19% per cent of respondents in the rural town of Phonkham believed that life in the past was happier than today, compared with 65% in Vientiane” (2007:71).

Qualitative research looking specifically at happiness in Laos is fairly limited. The Participatory Development Training Centre (PADETC) carried out a small piece of research with children and young people looking at the determinants of happiness by age groups. Limited information is given about the methodology of the survey, but the results are presented in a mind map where answers to the question ‘what makes you happy?’ are identified as either ‘physical’ or ‘mental’. In the age group 17-23 the most prevalent answers considered in the mental category are “family warmth” (15%), “friends” (10%) and “being a good child” (10%) whereas in the physical category the most common answers are “good health” (13%) and “cash” (13%) (PADETC, 2009: 10). Phimmachanh looked at the impact of ‘agricultural extension’ services on farmer’s happiness and wellbeing. He found that farmers identified ten areas that impacted upon their wellbeing: “rice, money, health, household assets, family relations, social infrastructures, social relations, education, natural environment and culture” (2009:56). In particular Phimachanh focuses on rice, which he calls the Lao “happy crop”, saying:

Rice determines living condition of individual, the more rice, the happier the person is; if there is lack of rice it is the sign of poverty and rice makes people happy because they like to eat rice. For the poor, they perceive rice as the first priority, followed by money, family relations and health (2009:56).

There have been more qualitative and quantitative research studies looking at happiness and quality of life in Thailand. In 1986 the Thai Ministry of Public Health produced 8 quality of life indicators to influence social policy development, called the “Eight Fundamental Needs”. The eight different indicators relate to “good food, housing, (subjective) wellbeing, plenty of produce, birth spacing, community collaboration and morality” (Jongodomkarn and Camfield 2005:6). Jongodomkarn and Camfield (2005) cite Thurongwarangkul et al.

(2000, written in Thai language) who carried out research with villagers using participatory approaches to develop tools to measure quality of life in Thailand. They found that the key determinants of quality of life were: life security, good physical and mental health, positive family relationships, strong community, a positive environment, freedom, pride and living with others virtuously. Both Jongodomkarn and Camfield (2005) and Royo and Velazco (2006) report on studies undertaken by the ESRC's Wellbeing in Developing Countries Research Group (WeD)⁹ in five rural Thai communities, three of which were in the Thai northeastern province of Isaan, where the majority of the population are Ethnic Lao and speak Isaan dialect which is closely related to the Lao language (Evans 1999:4). Royo and Velazco (2006) carried out a quantitative analysis of data collected using the WeD's Resources and Needs Questionnaire and found that family relationships, health and money (in that order) are the three most significant indicators of subjective wellbeing. They suggest that the importance of money is related to ability to meet basic needs (there is a strong correlation between satisfaction with income and adequate access to food) and to "how (the head of the household) perceives its wealth status relative to others" (2006:31). They also found that happiness in rural Thailand correlates negatively with age and that children's education is the domain with which household heads are most likely to be dissatisfied (Royo and Velazco, 2006). Jongodomkarn and Camfield (2005) provide a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews and focus groups carried out in the same five regions of rural Thailand. They asked participants to identify and rank "aspects of life that contribute to their wellbeing" (p. 8) and also about "the characteristics of people who were perceived as living well or badly and their personal experiences of well-being and ill-being (for example the 'happiest' and 'unhappiest' times in their life)" (p. 10). The study identified 26 aspects of quality of life, the most important being family relationships, health, money, occupation and housing. Family relationships was the most important aspect

⁹ <http://www.welldev.org.uk/> (Accessed: 29th July 2014)

of quality of life in all the five fieldwork sites and was seen to include: “following social norms, engaging in reciprocal relationships of caring and support, and meeting your family’s needs” (pg. 32).

The most recent, although unpublished, research looking at happiness in Laos was a national consultation for the 9th Asia-Europe People’s Forum (AEPF)¹⁰ carried out in 2012 in all 17 provinces of the country using participatory research techniques. The consultation asked different groups of people (stratified by age and social status) about the things that make them happy and the things that cause suffering in their lives. The broad findings of the consultation show four main themes that Lao people across the provinces and across the different age and social groups considered to be important in order to maximise the happiness and minimise the suffering that they experience in their lives. These four themes were:

- Good governance
- Improved sustainable livelihoods and social protection
- Good health and adequate education
- Protection of natural resources¹¹

The consultation included youth groups in each province and although a detailed analysis of the results has never been published, private correspondence with Sombath Somphone suggests that the most common themes emerging from this group were:

- Education (including quality of education, access to education, investment in education, vocational education, family ability to fund education)

¹⁰ For more information about the AEPF see page 69, below.

¹¹ As stated in the draft of an article written for the Vientiane Times which was subsequently withdrawn from publication as a result of controversy around the consultation and the AEPF, but which can be seen online by members of the google group “LAOFAB” at: <http://www.LaoFAB.org/document/view/1869> (Accessed: 14th August 2014).

For more information, or to join LAOFAB go to: <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/LaoFAB> (Accessed: 29th July 2014)

- Sufficient household economy (balancing income with expenditure, with particular reference to being able to fund education)
- Employment (with particular reference to job security)
- Social disorder (with particular reference to drugs and theft)
- Social justice

There are some common themes that emerge across all of these studies regarding happiness in Laos and Isaan. Having sufficient and reliable resources to meet basic needs is seen to be important by all of the research and, similarly, health emerges as an important factor that is perceived as important for wellbeing. While family relationships often feature as the most important factor perceived to affect happiness (Jongodomkarn and Camfield, 2005; PADETC, 2009; Royo and Velazco, 2006) this is not a theme that emerges explicitly from the AEPF (2012) consultation. However many of the most common themes from the consultation affect whole families and, based upon a reading of all of the literature related to wellbeing in Laos, it is a reasonable assumption that the reasons why these themes are important may include a consideration of not only individuals but also family members.

Civil Society in Laos

The Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF) views a country's civil society as having a vital role to play as a 'bridge' between governments and communities, with one of its key roles being to facilitate the inclusion of "the people's voice" into the political arena¹². Although in 1975 it was an expressed aim of the LPRP that Lao PDR was to be "a nation governed by the people for the people", since 1975, mass organisations have occupied many of the spaces and fulfilled many of the functions normally ascribed to civil society, with the important difference that they were not independent from the government but rather "quasi-

¹² <http://www.aepf.info/about> (Accessed: 14th August 2014).

governmental party organizations” (ADB 2011: 2). Government policy directly relating to young people and organisations to support young people is organised under the umbrella of one such mass organisation, the Lao People’s Revolutionary Youth Union (LPRYU). Whereas one role of civil society may be to promote the inclusion of public voices, it seems that the LPRYU acts primarily to promote the LPRP’s political agenda to young people. In 1998 Dr. Bounpone Bouttanavong Secretary General of the Central Committee of the LPRYU gave a speech at the UN World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, stating that the aim of the LPRYU was to “build our young people to be good citizens, to have a fervent patriotic spirit, to love our new regime, to upgrade their educational levels, to get jobs, to have good and strong health, good morals and internationalism”. He also further identified six areas of focus for the Government’s national youth policy as; patriotism and internationalism, education, employment, health, morals and striving¹³.

Despite the existence of mass organisations, however, as recently as 2007 Rehbein wrote that “there is no ‘civil society’ in Laos” (2007:8). It may have been more accurate to write that there was no visible or official indigenous civil society in the country at this time since groups of local people were working, unregistered, to support their communities. Arnst (2014) clearly makes the point that the lack of indigenous NGOs does not necessarily denote the lack of a civil society saying: “Perhaps NGOs are to civil society what money is to an economy. While the former may be the most visible, quantifiable and accessible aspects, they only partially reflect or represent the larger whole.”

International Non-Governmental Organisations (iNGOs) have always operated officially in Laos although between 1975 and 1986 only three iNGOs had permission to work in Laos under strict restrictions.¹⁴ After the change in political direction and opening up of the country was consolidated with the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism in 1986,

¹³ See transcript of the speech at: <http://www.un.org/events/youth98/speeches/118lao.htm> (Accessed: 29th July 2014)

¹⁴ The three iNGOs were: The American Friends Service Committee, The Mennonite Central Committee and Save the Children UK

other iNGOs were allowed to register to operate in the country and the Lao iNGO network, “a focal point for iNGO information dissemination in the Lao PDR”¹⁵ has, at the time of writing, 78 members, which is still likely to be lower than the true number of iNGOs operating in the country.

A potential doorway for the introduction of Lao-based NGOs (locally known as Non-Profit Associations or NPAs) was opened with the introduction of the Lao Constitution in 1991, which included a new right to association. Between 1991 and 2009 such associations existed either unregistered, and therefore unable to gain access to any funds, or operated ‘under the wing’ of an iNGO or registered in an ad hoc manner through a specific government ministry or as a business or training institute (ADB 2011:1). It was not until the promulgation of Prime Minister’s Decree 115 in April 2009 that NPAs were able to register directly with the government. In its briefing on civil society in Laos, Asia Development Bank (ADB) suggests that this “signals a policy change from government that local civil society has a place in the development process” (ADB 2011:3).

An online article, written by The Asia Foundation’s then Country Director in Laos in June 2010, reveals an optimistic view about the future impact of Lao civil society after the changes of 2009:

Even beyond the critical objective of poverty alleviation, a vibrant civil society holds potential to have a significant impact in contributing to good governance. In the highly centralized Lao government system, a skilled, articulate, and respected civil society sector could provide an unprecedented avenue for citizens to communicate with policy makers and impact laws and regulations. The process will take time, but as the first organizations are now registering to become legal associations under the new decree, the next year could mark the start of a real Lao civil society sector (Kunze, 2010).

¹⁵ <http://www.directoryofngos.org/pub/index.php> (Accessed: 29th July 2014)

The registration process for NPAs, however, proved complex and time consuming. Arnst (2014) describes the process thus:

Founding committees and board members must undergo police checks, and association names, charters, goals and membership usually face significant changes before receiving approval. Thereafter, the regular submission of plans, budgets and reports for approval by central, provincial and often district levels is also required in order to continue operating.

During the whole two-year period that I spent in Vientiane, both of the NPAs with whom I volunteered were going through the process of registration and neither were registered by the time I left Laos. By 2012, The Learning House for Development (LHD), a member organisation providing networking opportunities and services for both registered and non-registered NPAs and the wider Lao civil society community had produced a directory of members listing 47 different NPAs, although it is not clear how many of these are registered and how many unregistered.¹⁶

The year 2012 saw another opportunity for optimism about Lao civil society when Vientiane hosted the 9th Asia-Europe People's Forum with the theme of "Solidarity Against Poverty and for Sustainable Development".¹⁷ This international civil society forum was one of a range of high profile international meetings related to the Asia-Europe Meeting¹⁸ that took place in Vientiane around October 2012. The expressed commitment of the AEPF is "to enable a secure environment that encourages learning and reflection and provides space for open, respectful, diverse and constructive debate. We support harmony, compassion and understanding, whilst recognizing the strength of diversity and solidarity for peaceful and sustainable development".¹⁹ In Laos, organisation of the forum was effectively a four-way partnership between Government, mass organisations, NPAs and iNGOs, with a national

¹⁶ <http://www.lao-npa-network.org/> (Accessed: 29th July 2014)

¹⁷ <http://www.aepf.info/> (Accessed: 29th July 2014)

¹⁸ For more information see: <http://www.aseminboard.org/about-asef-menu.html> (Accessed: 29th July 2014)

¹⁹ <http://www.aepf.info/aepf9/99-aepf9-reflections-and-lesson-learning> (Accessed: 29th July 2014)

organising committee within Laos and an international organising committee including representatives from civil societies in Asia and Europe.

AEPF9 took place from 16-19 October 2012 and was attended by 948 delegates from 47 different countries. After the event a vision statement for Lao civil society was drafted (although never formally agreed by all the stakeholders) that made a wide range of recommendations including the following selection that bears relevance to issues of young people and volunteering:

Develop youth and young people's capacities to contribute to development in their local area by encouraging educational institutions to involve teachers and students in learning and participating in real life development actions.

Support students and young people's learning of development issues related to Lao society and culture, its strengths and uniqueness and ways to reduce poverty and improve the livelihoods of the people.

Support primary and secondary school students to be engaged in social and community services through conducting surveys in their own villages and to submit their findings to the related authorities on a regular basis and to incorporate this experiential learning into the local curricula.

Enable children and youth to become agents of change and spearhead development that moves towards a model which is more locally relevant, culturally appropriate and delivers results to local people.²⁰

This vision statement sets out a vision for a civil society that supports development that is based upon more than purely economic development; development that builds on the unique strengths of Lao culture, that prioritises education and that engages, responds to and delivers for Lao people including Lao children and young people.

²⁰ Available in the LaoFAB document repository at: <http://www.LaoFAB.org/document/view/1884> (Accessed: 29th July 2014)

Fieldwork for the current research ended in October 2012, the same month as the AEPF was held in Vientiane. However, developments in Lao civil society in the intervening months cannot be ignored when setting the context for the current research and will have implications for the research findings. In December 2012, Sombath Somphone, recently retired Director of PADETC and described by John Kerry, US Secretary of State as “one of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic’s most respected civil society figures,” was abducted and has not been seen since (Mortensen, 2014). Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have officially stated that they believe Somphone’s disappearance to be an “enforced disappearance” (Sims, 2013).

The continued lack of information means that no-one (with the obvious exception of those involved) can know why Somphone was abducted. His wife, Shui Meng Ng, is keen to emphasise that Somphone is not a political activist and that he collaborated closely with the Lao Government about his work that primarily promoted sustainable development (see, for example, Sims, 2014). Common speculation in the press suggest that Somphone’s key role on the national organising committee of the AEPF may be relevant. On the academic online discussion forum “New Mandela” Sims (2013) posted an article speculating about the AEPF:

During the forum Sombath gave a keynote speech, in which he stated that; “We focus too much on economic growth and ignore its negative impact... we need to give more space for the ordinary people, especially young people, and allow them to be the drivers of change and transformation.” His speech was inspirational, but his comments that “hearing from the voices of the people is the first step to transforming the power structure”, is not the sort of thing that the country’s authoritarian regime likes to hear. (Sims, 2013)

Other journalists have pointed to Somphone’s support for rural Lao communities to speak up about difficulties that they have experienced relating to land rights and resettlement as another possible motivation (see, for example, Grindoz, 2013).

There has also been speculation that the aim of the abduction is broader than simply to remove one specific person. Rupert Abbott, Amnesty International’s Asia researcher,

suggested that “Sombath was heavily involved with arranging the civil society forum. It appears that someone within the authorities saw what was happening – civil society coming together – as a threat” (cited in Davidson, 2014). If the aim of the abduction were to stall the momentum of Lao civil society there are suggestions that this aim may have been successful. Arnst (2014) describes how “the reaction was both swift and extreme. While the voices of concerned individuals, groups and governments around the world grew, those within the country fell silent.” While most commentators are sympathetic to the impact of the case upon other Lao civil society leaders, some are critical of the international NGO and development community in Laos who, with notable exceptions, have made no official statement of concern about Sombath’s disappearance (Arnst 2014). One media article quotes a source from within the Lao development community as saying that “since Sombath disappeared any attempts at criticism of government policy, either by the press or organisations ‘have taken a quantum leap backwards and are currently frozen’” (Clark, 2014). My own communications since Sombath’s disappearance with people working in Lao civil society have left me with the impression both of specific activities being changed to eliminate anything that could be interpreted as challenging to the authorities and of a generalised air of unease and caution. This contrasts starkly with the optimism and energy that was present leading up to and immediately after the AEPF.

Youth Volunteering in Laos

The participants in the current research are young people who self-identify as volunteers with NPAs in Vientiane. Volunteers and volunteerism are an important part of Lao civil society and the Lao Youth Network²¹ (LYN) is a loose network of NPAs and other civil society organisations working with young people in Vientiane many of whom recruit young Lao people as volunteers. These organisations tend to be small local organisations with

²¹ <http://laoyouthnetwork.org/> (Accessed: 29th July 2014)

limited resources and flexible remits and often do not prioritise publicity materials and therefore it is difficult to access accurate figures of volunteers. All of the young people who participated in this research identify themselves as volunteers with one of the NPAs that make up the LYN.

The literature about volunteerism in Laos and particularly among Lao young people is limited. A United Nations Volunteers (UNV) report, written in 2002 to celebrate the international year of volunteering, provides an outline of volunteerism in Laos. Although the report does include several detailed examples of projects that work with Lao volunteers and individual Lao volunteers, its timing before the promulgation of decree 115 in 2009 influenced its primary focus upon foreign volunteers in Laos. In 2002, UNV observed that “as there are no local not-for-profit organizations in Lao PDR, most of the service for others is either done through religious groups or through international volunteer sending agencies” (UNV 2002: 41). This claim is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, while it is true that there were no officially registered NPAs in 2002 it is not correct to claim that there were no local not-for-profit organisations in the country. Secondly the idea that “service for others” in Laos is primarily carried out through any kind of organisation ignores the informal help and support that exists in Lao families and communities and which, indeed, is highlighted in the report as ‘unmanaged volunteering’. A more contemporary alternative account of youth volunteerism in Laos is provided by an unpublished MSc. thesis written in 2011 by a young volunteer with Donkhai Children’s Development Centre (DCDC), a member organisation of the LYN. This phenomenological study examines the accounts told by 7 young Lao people about their experiences of being a volunteer with DCDC (Duangpanya, unpublished).

The current research is set in the context of youth volunteerism in NPAs. Therefore a brief overview of the relevant findings of the UNV (2002) report and the study conducted by Duangpanya (unpublished) follows in order for the reader to understand the background to this context and to inform the discussion of volunteering that follows in the body of the thesis.

What is volunteering?

The Lao word for ‘volunteers’ is generally given as ‘Asasamak’; ‘Asa’ means ‘willing’ while ‘samak’ is ‘to do’.
(UNV 2002:32)

UNV (2002) suggests that the most common answer given by Lao people to the question of “what is a volunteer?” was “one who is willing and happy to help without expecting a financial reward and works to develop Laos, and to gain experience” (p. 51). Bourvay, a young volunteer who tells her story in Duangpanya’s study (unpublished) emphasises freely giving time, personal development and helping others when she defines a volunteer as:

...a person who sacrifices his or her time. He or she is always willing to learn new things for his/her development or growth. He or she is also always ready to help others (p. 48).

UNV suggest that there are limitations to the word *asasamak* because some people believe that it has a negative connotation related to being inexperienced. The authors offer alternative words that were given to represent the concept of a volunteer including *phu samak jai* (person who acts from the heart) and *samakigan* (solidarity together) (2002: 32). Further to this, one young volunteer in the current research suggested that the word *asasamak* had become related to a fashion or image among some young people and she wondered if it might be better to go back to a more commonly used phrase such as *phu ti suay leua* (person who helps).

A diagram in the UNV report divides both managed and unmanaged volunteering activities in Laos into 30 categories (plus a 31st category of “other” which accounts for 4% of volunteer activity) (2002:38). These categories vary in type and in breadth from “teaching handicrafts” (11%) to “building roads” (4%) to “general community help” (6%) to “blood donation” (2%). UNV found that, “on average, each respondent spends at least thirty minutes per voluntary task and performs more than two activities per day” (UNV 2002: 36). The volunteers featured in Duangpanya’s (unpublished) study primarily talked about running after-school groups for children, usually featuring creative and/or traditional activities such as Lao dancing, storytelling, weaving etc. Several volunteers also mention

carrying out social work activities with other groups of people in the village such as elders, village officials and families in need. The volunteers also write about study tours and volunteer training in which they participated.

The range of activities considered as volunteer activities is, therefore, broad. UNV (2002) makes a distinction between ‘managed’ and ‘unmanaged’ volunteerism, where managed voluntary work takes place within a volunteer role in an organisation and unmanaged voluntary work is done without a specific volunteer role as a part of normal everyday activities. The report links unmanaged volunteering to dominant cultural customs and traditional ways of caring for individuals and organising communities. UNV suggests, however, that characterising these activities as ‘volunteering’ can be problematic since they may be carried out from a sense of social obligation or pressure rather than genuine willingness. The young people whose narratives feature in Duangpanya’s (unpublished) research all volunteer with DCDC and therefore their activities fall into UNV’s category of managed volunteering. However, this distinction between these different types of volunteering is not made in this study and, for these young people at least, it seems that there are interconnections between formal and informal volunteering or helping. One of the volunteer writes:

I believe that whatever knowledge we have, we must use it, so that it will not be forgotten. I can also apply my experiences from this volunteer work to my family by bringing home some activities such as rock painting, papier-mâché and mushroom growing. Somehow, by sharing what I learned, my family also benefits from it (p. 50).

Why volunteer?

The UNV (2002) report identifies reasons that people in Laos volunteer which can be divided into three broad groups:

- Empathy towards fellow human beings and altruism
- Desire for credentials and experience
- Sense of social obligation

The report also finds that people perceive a range of benefits that they get from being a volunteer including personal development, improved social bonds, improved environment and opportunities to fulfil their cultural duties (2002:45).

The narratives included in Duangpanya (unpublished) emphasise a desire to help other people and the personal development, skills and opportunities that they have gained as a result of being a volunteer. Five of the 7 young people found out about volunteering through family members or friends who were already volunteers, one just happened to pass the centre and was curious and the final volunteer heard the Director of the centre speak and was inspired to become a volunteer. The mentorship that volunteers received from Madame Xuyen, the Director of DCDC, is important in all seven of the narratives. Duangpanya concludes that volunteering has been transformational for these seven young people and points to the common theme in the narratives that volunteering has both given the volunteers meaning in their life and the skills to do the things that they discover that they want to do:

We made big changes in our lives. We realized who are and we knew what we want to do (unpublished: 73).

All seven of the young people whose stories are featured in the research have gone on to find employment in the field of social work in Laos.

Volunteering and happiness

The international literature on volunteering suggests a positive link between volunteering and happiness. Borgonovi (2008) found that, among Americans volunteering for religious organisations, there is a causal link between volunteering and increased self-reported happiness. She suggests that this link has three factors; firstly volunteering strengthens social networks, which have been shown to be important to happiness, secondly volunteering is valued in (at least American) society and therefore volunteering raises the volunteer's social status and, thirdly, volunteering can promote empathic emotions and increase satisfaction with their own lives in comparison to the lives of others (2008: 2331). The link is also evident in less formal volunteering experiences; Luks (1988) writes about a

“helper’s high” and Post (2005) concludes that “a strong correlation exists between the well-being, happiness, health and longevity of people who are emotionally kind and compassionate in their charitable helping activities – as long as they are not overwhelmed” (p. 73). Prayukvong (2007) examines employee volunteering in Thailand from a Buddhist perspective and suggest that, in the west, the purpose of volunteering is for external gain, whereas Buddhist perspectives of “happiness which is not dependent on external things” are at the centre of volunteering activity (p. 15).

In his introduction, Duangpanya (unpublished) reflects upon his own experience as a volunteer that “I feel satisfied when I see other people happy. I enjoy what I do for others because I believe that I don’t only give but at the same time I also receive something from them through my volunteer work” (p. 1). Other volunteers featured in the study corroborate this connection between volunteering and happiness; that one of the aims of their volunteering is to make other people and that in turn makes them happy. Sometimes the happiness that they gain is immediate (“doing something for others makes volunteer workers happy” (unpublished: 45)) and sometimes they gain knowledge and experience which they perceive will increase their happiness in the future (“volunteer work is a basic starting point towards developing oneself into becoming a good person and enjoying quality of life in the future” (unpublished: 49)).

The connection that Duangpanya (unpublished) makes between volunteering and having a sense of meaning in life and the theme of transformation links to *eudaimonic* ideas of happiness as flourishing and becoming the best person that you can be. One volunteer wrote that “volunteer work helped me to train myself and it guided me to the right direction...I always thought positive thoughts” (p. 47). Crucially, however, this flourishing happens with other people, and the volunteers talked about meaning coming to them in interaction with the children with whom they work, in the inspirational mentorship of Madame Xuyen the Director of DCDC and with their fellow volunteers. Duangpanya talks of how the volunteers become like a supportive family for each other and of how they support and encourage each other and the people with whom they volunteer. He states that

“all of us are happy and proud of what has become of all of us (as a result of being volunteers)” (p. 65).

In addition to the implicit links between volunteering and happiness, several of the NPAs that work with young volunteers in Vientiane explicitly consider happiness in their aims and vision (for more information relating to the main research sites of the current research see page 90). As set out in the vision for civil society that was drafted at the AEPF9 (see page 69), there is a view of civil society as representing an alternative model of development that does not focus purely on economic development but includes broader indicators of progress based on listening to people’s views about their quality of life and that places a particular emphasis upon the role of young people in their communities.. The limited happiness research that has been conducted in Laos has largely emerged from key players and processes in this civil society. In DCDC (the site of Duangpanya’s unpublished research) there is a mural incorporating the concept of GNH (see page 122) and several of the older research participants referred to discussion sessions that had been held at different NPAs in the past about GNH. There are, therefore, already established links in Vientiane between young people, volunteering and sustainable development, and this research sits at the crux where all of these issues come together.

Conclusion

In his work looking at how globalisation affects adolescents, Larson (2002) warns against losing sight of the importance of local culture when observing increasing commonality. “What is emerging across the world are postmodern assemblages of local and global elements combined in different and changing ways” (2002:3). In particular he cautions against assuming that an increasing aspiration to a “shared material lifestyle” necessarily means that people’s values and beliefs are changing (2002:3). Despite a growing research literature in the country, ethnographic and qualitative social research projects that seek to understand people’s everyday lives in Laos are limited. In the first edition of the *Journal of Lao Studies* (2010) Enfield sets out an agenda for research in Laos where he emphasises the

need to understand the diverse cultures and everyday lives of people in Laos. In order to add to the wider literature on subjective wellbeing, this research seeks to provide rich and specific information about the ways that young Lao volunteers with NPAs in Vientiane understand happiness.

This chapter paints an image of a country about which little is known in the UK. Laos has a complex history that seems to render the country both invisible to and strategically vital for the international community. Laos is a fascinating country with a turbulent recent history and a varied and rapidly changing political and social fabric. What social qualitative research has occurred has tended to employ an anthropological focus upon the rich ethnic diversity of Laos' rural areas. While these areas of the country are vital since they are home to the majority of Laos' population, Vientiane City is a focal point for change in the country. The newly visible civil society in Laos focuses upon listening to Lao voices and promoting alternative people-centred models of development that are not purely economically focused. Key people are already considering the concept of happiness and have conducted limited research looking at happiness in the country, providing a context for this deeper study of how young people understand happiness.

Arnett (2002) argues that the psychological effects of globalisation may be particularly high for young people since they are in a process of transition from childhood to adulthood, establishing their identity and finding their place in the world. This mirrors an interesting theme from my previous MSc. research (McMellon, unpublished) where young Laotians repeatedly used a metaphor of the Laos country 'growing up' and finding its place in the world. It seems, therefore that young people are a particularly interesting group through which to study subjective wellbeing, and perceptions of changing subjective wellbeing in Laos. The young people who volunteer with NPAs in Vientiane occupy an unusual position in a diverse and rapidly changing country, simultaneously influenced by a complex political legacy, a rapidly modernising capital city and a newly visible civil society. In choosing them as research participants I emphasise this unique position and make no claims that they are representative of young people in Laos, nor even of young people in Vientiane.

However I do argue that this particular group of young people offer a fascinating and useful opportunity to explore the multiple influences upon the ways that young Lao people perceive happiness in Vientiane.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

After examining different aspects of the context in the previous two chapters, I now turn to the methodology employed in order to carry out the research. In Chapter 1 of this thesis I argued that rich qualitative data are necessary in order to gain a deep understanding of how people perceive and experience happiness in their everyday lives. This chapter describes how I went about collecting such research with a group of research participants – young Lao volunteers with civil society organisations in Vientiane – who were introduced in Chapter Two. This chapter also explains the principles underlying the methodology and my reasons for many of the decisions made in the process of conducting the research.

In particular this chapter provides:

- An outline of the aim, values and questions underpinning the current research.
- A discussion of the literature related to the post-positivist research paradigm within which the research and the research methodology are situated.
- A description of the research site and participants.
- An outline of the research methods used and the challenges faced during the fieldwork period and analysis.
- A discussion of the ethical considerations necessary and solutions employed to conduct the current research.
- A discussion of the particular challenges related to translating research about subjective experience across languages and the ways that these challenges were addressed in the current research.

Since the post-positivist research paradigm, as described below, argues that all research is shaped by implicit interests and values, and that these should be made explicit (Guba and Lincoln, 1985; Lather, 1986), the chapter begins with a statement of both research questions and research values that have guided the research design and process.

Research Questions and Values

Questions may come in the course of the study, but there must also be some question at the beginning (Wolcott 1999:70).

This research process began with a broad research aim which was to explore the individual and shared ways that young Lao volunteers experience and understand happiness with a view to considering the implications of these findings for policy promoting happiness.

The research is underpinned by a set of values that informed the process of exploration. These values include:

- The importance of finding ways that happiness can be communicated and shared authentically and strategically between individuals and across cultures in order to affect change.
- That people's stories are important in their entirety. The value of experience lies in the messiness, the connections and the contradictions as much as in the numbers and the themes. It might, on occasion, be useful to develop frameworks and models to help navigate this messiness, but it is important to remember that such frameworks are simply tools and are not the same as the reality.
- That research has the potential to be a positive learning experience and an opportunity for reflection for everyone involved in the process. That research processes and outcomes should be interesting, accessible and useful for research participants as well as for the researcher and the academy.

The specific research questions that emerged through the research process in response to the interaction between my interests and the interests of the research participants are:

- What do the ways that young Lao volunteers in Vientiane express happiness tell us about the ways that they conceptualise happiness?
- What do young volunteers in Vientiane say makes them happy?
- What beliefs do young volunteers in Vientiane have about happiness?
- How do these beliefs about happiness fit with young volunteers' expressed experiences of happiness?

A post-positivist research paradigm

All research is built upon assumptions about the world and beliefs about the reasons that we conduct research. A research paradigm is a consistent set of inter-connected epistemological, political and methodological beliefs about the world that “organises our whole approach to being in the world” (Reason and Bradbury 2001:4) and “defines for inquirers what it is that they are about” (Guba and Lincoln 1994:108). Situating the research within a particular paradigm ensures that these assumptions are explicit and provides a framework within which to analyse and discuss the research findings.

Chapter One set out the view that subjective experiences of happiness are relevant for development policy. While these experiences are often quantified in order to measure and compare happiness, there is an increasing acknowledgement of the need for qualitative research that explores the richness and depth of the ways in which people experience and understand happiness. Such research, however, requires a research paradigm that is grounded in everyday experience, values subjectivity and recognises the importance of people's own interpretations of their experiences. In addition, since there is evidence that happiness varies across cultures, such a paradigm also needs to take account of *inter-subjectivity* or the ways in which groups of people co-create meaning about happiness.

Guba and Lincoln (1985) trace a shift from the positivist research paradigm to a post-positivist research paradigm. They identify the positivist research paradigm with the Western Enlightenment and the rise in importance of scientific knowledge for explaining a secular world; a rise so successful that “we are all so imbued with the tenets of science that we take its assumptions utterly for granted, so much so that we almost cannot comprehend the possibility that there might be other ways of thinking” (1985: 9). Where positivist research is about identifying objectively true and generalisable knowledge, the post-positivist paradigm emphasises knowledge of particular instances in specific contexts.

This shift is truly radical, demanding that we accept knowledge and ideas into our research that previously may not have been acceptable and that may still feel uncomfortable because of the ways that we have been taught to think. Guba and Lincoln identify five fundamental and interconnected axioms that distinguish the new paradigm:

- There is no single objective and reducible reality; instead there are many equally valid and holistic realities.
- It is not possible to draw a clear distinction between the knower (researcher) and the known (research participants).
- It is not possible to make generalisations that are completely independent of the context in which the information was collected.
- Everything is inter-connected and it is impossible to absolutely determine clear lines of cause and effect.
- Inquiry can never be free from values. (1985: 37)

These five axioms in turn, suggest Guba and Lincoln, have implications for the ‘doing’ of the research, and they identify 14 basic characteristics of research that necessarily emerge from the post-positivist paradigm. These characteristics are that the research needs to be carried out in a natural environment (1) with an acknowledgement of the researcher (and possibly other humans) as the primary research tool (2) who makes use of tacit knowledge in addition to propositional knowledge (3) and uses predominantly qualitative methods (4). The research is likely to adhere to an emergent research design (5) that makes use of

purposive sampling techniques (6), inductive data analysis (7), broadly defined grounded theory (8) and a case study model of reporting (9). The boundaries of the work will develop in response to emerging themes (10), but will focus on the particulars of the case in point rather than generalisations (11) and the researcher will be tentative about applying them more broadly than the specific context under inquiry (12). Findings will be negotiated with research participants (13) and will develop new criteria for trustworthiness which accept both the role of the researcher and of values in the project (14) (1985: 39).

Heron and Reason (1997) build on Guba and Lincoln's (1985) vision of a post-positivist paradigm, placing participation at the centre of the research process. They move away from Lincoln and Guba's absolute relativism, suggesting that objective reality may exist but acknowledging the challenges of knowing such a reality. Their participatory research paradigm locates the discovery/creation of knowledge in experience, and views experience as an encounter with other humans or with the world. According to this view, therefore, research "is concerned with the development of living knowledge" that is grounded in our subjective relational experiences (Reason and Bradbury 2001:2). Individuals are "epistemologically privileged" (Balen, Blyth et al. 2006:31) in relation to their own subjective experiences but can work together towards mutual understandings that may point to possible objective universals.

This epistemological importance of subjective experience supports a political commitment to sharing the stories of those whose opinions are often silenced and experiences often hidden in the public sphere (Heron 1996). Such epistemological and political beliefs require us to develop ways of doing research that genuinely involve participants and value their participation as individuals who bring experience, skills and time to the research process. Guba and Lincoln's principle of "value-bound research" represented a radical step away from supposedly value-free positivist research by demonstrating that values are inherent in all research (1985). Heron and Reason (1997), however, take a step further by suggesting that values guide research and that these values should ideally be shared by the researcher and research participants. Such value-led research views research as part of a process of

people, together, examining, learning about and changing their worlds, thus helping to ensure that the research is not a purely intellectual exercise but remains focussed upon its potential impacts.

However, critics of such a participatory approach to research have identified potential problems with such a focus upon participation that it is necessary to address. Contributors to *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (eds. Cooke and Kothari:2001) discuss how the practice of participative research can become reductionist and non-inclusive, presenting a series of binary oppositions (North and South, professional knowledge and local knowledge, researcher and research participants) and investing these oppositions with moral ideas of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (Kothari 2001). It is easy to see the political reasons why ‘local knowledge’, which has often historically been excluded from research discourses, has been prioritised. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) warn against assuming that any research participant has a fixed identity that is “transparently knowable to themselves” (p. 501) and advocate instead for an epistemology that sees the world “not as a series of sites from which we can extract meaning, but as a field of practices and processes through which we might engage with potential and think differently” (p. 512).

Kothari (2001) argues, further, that prioritising local knowledge at the expense of global (structural) knowledge denies the multiplicities of power dynamics that affect people’s everyday lives and, therefore, such an approach has the potential to disempower those that it seeks to empower. Such criticisms have often focused on participatory practice (and in particular brief project-based research such as participatory rural appraisal) where a facilitator may simplify every-day experiences in order to fit the structure required by the project or tool (Kothari 2001:147). In research terms, Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) challenge the meaning of ‘active participation’, showing that often only certain behaviour – i.e. those that are considered ‘useful’ to the research process – are considered to be participation. They argue instead for the use of ethnographic methodologies that allow researchers to learn from all manifestations of participation, even those that are unexpected or challenging.

Methodology

My challenge was therefore to develop a methodology that is consistent with the post-positivist research paradigm and values participation whilst avoiding the critiques of participatory research. The methodology must value the different experience, knowledge and investments of all those involved in the research and allow the research process to emerge through a process of collaboration and negotiation. At the centre of this methodology must be respectful relationships that inform the research process through mutual learning, rather than a strict set of rules about how participants should participate. In this section I outline why the methodology that I have chosen combines ethnography with participative group-work and explain how I believe this methodology meets these criteria.

Geertz places ethnography firmly within the post-positivist research paradigm when he states that:

Believing with Max Weber that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it therefore to be not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (2001: 145)

Clifford (1983: 119) further describes ethnography as a dialogue and as a means of “producing knowledge from an intense intersubjective engagement”. An emphasis upon meaning and engagement offers the possibility of naturalistic research that can sit within the post-positivist research paradigm without necessarily succumbing to the reductionist challenges to participatory research (Lassiter 2005; Tacchi et al. 2003). Other researchers have suggested that the distinction between ethnographic methodologies and participatory methodologies is ‘artificial’ since ethnographic studies may use participatory techniques and *vice versa* (Camfield et al. 2009: 11).

Although a clear definition is elusive, ethnography is likely to involve an extended time period spent in ‘the field’, a focus of exploration rather than testing hypotheses, the development of relationships with key informants, emphasis placed on ongoing naturalistic inquiry and a tendency to work with ‘unstructured data’ (Atkinson and Hamersley 2000).

There is an assumption underlying ethnography that the researcher will learn more if she/he physically place her/himself into the situations that the research participants experience than if they “restricted themselves to verbal inquiry” (Savage 2000: 331). However, happiness is both simple and complex, encompassing relatively straightforward experiences of pleasure and potentially complex concepts that reach to the core of our identity, our values, our aspirations and that which gives our lives meaning. Despite volunteering for organisations that valued happiness and wellbeing, most of the research participants told me that they had never been asked about their happiness before and, as trusting relationships developed, we discussed how they were not used to thinking critically about their emotional life let alone sharing their thoughts with another person. In order to explore these complexities, contradictions and fluidities I felt that I needed to provide extended and repeated opportunities to discuss them with research participants above and beyond one-off interviews or snatched conversations. Reflecting Abu-Lughod’s concern that ethnographic description can have a tendency to “smooth over contradictions, conflicts of interest and doubts and arguments” (1991: 153) I was also concerned that, if using a purely ethnographic approach, I would miss many of the complexities because I might not always know the right questions to ask or the right times to pay attention. I wanted this to be a collaborative exploration and therefore, in order to minimize although never eliminate some of these concerns, I drew on my professional background as a youth development worker and planned to use group-work alongside ethnography in order to create reflective opportunities for research participants to grapple collectively with the complexities and contradictions of happiness.

I had ideas about what these ‘spaces’ might look like and was particularly influenced by the Co-operative Inquiry research approach, envisaging that, in each fieldwork site, I would work, according to this approach, together with a group of young people as an action learning group, who inquire about an aspect of their (our) lives through a collaborative process of cycling between reflection and experience (Heron 1996). However, participation of any form is a negotiated activity; individuals assess the personal costs and benefits of taking part, including costs and benefits that I may not consider or be aware of (Clever

2001) and I started my fieldwork fully prepared to adapt my methods and methodology to the participants' collective rhythm (Pyrch and Castillo 2001).

Fieldwork

It is at this point necessary to take a step back from the methodology in order to describe the research sites and participants in order to move on to a full explanation of how the methodology worked in practice.

Changing plans

My initial plan was to work with young people in Vientiane Capital City and in a rural area, spending six months with each group. However, long bureaucratic delays in obtaining research permission resulted in an enforced period of more than 6 months in Vientiane when I was not allowed to conduct any research and, as I spent my time building relationships with organisations and young people, I increasingly found examples of how the indigenous Lao civil society considered happiness as an important concept and practice (see Chapter Two). I also became fascinated by this group of young people who volunteer with NPAs in Vientiane. Despite being a substantial number of young people²² volunteering with more than 20 organisations they seemed to be almost invisible in the wider community. Both Lao people and foreigners who had lived in Laos for many years repeatedly told me that it was not a part of Lao culture to volunteer and that Lao young people would not be interested in volunteering. Yet I met young Lao people with diverse life experiences and socio-economic backgrounds who gave their time to volunteer and told me how positive volunteering was in their lives. I came to see these young people who volunteer with NPAs in Vientiane as occupying a unique position at the crossroads of a

²² The actual figure is impossible to identify given difficulties of defining volunteers and getting accurate information about them.

country that continues to be affected by a complex political legacy, a rapidly modernising capital city and a newly visible civil society. I therefore made a decision to spend the entirety of my fieldwork period in Vientiane to work with young volunteers in two different NPAs and explore how they express, make sense of and experience happiness.

Research Participants

The Lao Youth Union considers anyone aged from 18 (until which time they are children) up to 35 to be a young person. I decided not to impose a strict definition on youth or to impose limits on participation but to allow young volunteers to self-identity. In reality most of the young volunteers who took part in the research were between 15 and 25. At the lower end of this age-range there was often fluidity concerning who was a volunteer and who was a “child” who was receiving support from the projects. At the upper end of this age range I saw that volunteers tended to gradually move away from volunteering when they graduated, got jobs and started families in their early to mid-twenties. The volunteers who remained in their mid to late-twenties tended to be those who were working in related jobs to their volunteering activities, who had familial ties with the projects and/or who had not yet started their own families.

Of the 46 interviewees, 28 identified as female and 18 as male. They ranged in age from 12 to 27, but 26 (57%) were aged between 16 and 21 and another 13 (28%) were aged between 22 and 25. All but two of the interviewees identified their ethnicity as either Lao Loum or Lao (see page 56), which is unsurprising since the population of Vientiane is largely from the broad ethnic category known as Lao Loum (as discussed on page 57). All but two of the interviewees (a different two) identified their religion as Buddhist, one identifying as Christian and another, more specifically, as Catholic. The interviewees varied widely in terms family background and socio-economic circumstance. However 39 out of the 46 had grown up in Vientiane and all 46 had completed at least 4 years of high school, indicating a level of opportunity not available to the majority of children and young people across Laos. The 7 interviewees who had not grown up in Vientiane had all moved

their either because to attend university or because they were a novice monk in the city, although these two reasons are often intertwined since many boys and young men enter the temple primarily to enable them to get an education.

The volunteer role varied dramatically between research participants; several young people volunteered regularly 5 or 6 days per week while others volunteered only sporadically as required or only attended occasional activities that appealed to them. All of the participants in this research are based in Vientiane Capital City (itself a broad area that incorporates both urban and semi-rural areas) except for one small group who are based a few kilometres over the city boundary in Vientiane Province. However, some of the volunteer groups do carry out activities outside of Vientiane Capital City. In this thesis when I used the word Vientiane I am referring to Vientiane Capital City unless I specifically say otherwise.

Research sites

My fieldwork was located primarily in two particular NPAs, Phonsinuane Volunteer Group (PVG) and Dongsavat Children and Youth Development Centre (DC&YDC)²³ as outlined below. However, the broader group of Lao Youth Network member organisations were invited to get involved in the research; I facilitated one standalone research workshop in each of 3 other civil society organisations that worked with young volunteers and invited young volunteers from these other NPAs to participate in interviews.

PVG and DC&YDC were chosen as focal research sites for several key reasons. Firstly, these organisations each explicitly had as one of their aims to promote young people's wellbeing through volunteering. Secondly young volunteers and staff in these organisations

²³ See page 112 for a consideration of the decision to name the two NPAs.

were interested to take part in the research and saw value for themselves and their organisations in taking part. Thirdly, the young volunteers and staff were happy for me to volunteer with them and conduct participant observation while I was volunteering. Fourthly, these two NPAs represent some of the diversity of Vientiane Capital City; at the time of conducting the fieldwork PVG was based in the city centre and worked with young volunteers from across the city who volunteered in Vientiane but also across other provinces of Laos, while DC&YDC was based in an urban village 8km out of the city centre and the majority of the volunteers lived in the same community where the majority of the volunteering activities took place.

Phonsinuane Volunteer Group (PVG)

PVG is a youth organisation set up in 2002 in Ban Phonsinuane, a relatively wealthy urban village near the centre of Vientiane Capital City. The organisation was originally located in the village office but subsequently moved to the village primary school and gained funding for volunteers to build two mud houses on the school grounds, one of which became a library for the school and the other an office for PVG. The office included a meeting room inside and outside had a covered veranda with a table and benches plus ample floor space, which served as an activity area. In the grounds of the project there was a largely neglected school garden and an unfinished third mud house, which had been built as a carpentry workshop but which was not completed in the time that I spent with the project.

Phoutthasinh Phimmachanh, the Director of PVG, spent many years as a young volunteer for other organisations in Vientiane and completed an MSc. in International Development in Geneva before returning to Lao and setting up PVG. Phimmachanh's thesis for his MSc. looked at farmers' happiness in Laos (Phimmachanh, 2009). He incorporated his learning about happiness into the vision for PVG, which is based on the concept of "quality of life", as outlined by Veenhoven who divides quality of life into four aspects: life chances, life abilities, life results and life appreciation. Of these aspects, life appreciation is particularly

related to happiness as it includes mood and (subjective) appraisals of life²⁴. At the time I started my fieldwork, Phimmachanh was still very much involved with PVG but was also working in a very busy full time job and was trying to move more responsibility for the organisation on to a core group of volunteers.

Throughout my fieldwork period, PVG was going through a period of change, registering as an NPA and moving towards a project-based rather than location-based model, with increasing projects based outside of the project's home village. During this period PVG was primarily funded by an iNGO based in Vientiane. In Ban Phonesinuane, PVG's activities focused mainly upon after school and holiday activities for children in the village school where they were based. They also provided scholarships to help local children with difficult family circumstances to attend school and several of the volunteers taught English classes during the school day. Outside of Ban Phonesinuane, the organisation was exploring opportunities to support children in Xiang Kuang, a province in north-eastern Laos. At the time I arrived in Laos the project paid three young people a small salary to do core work in the project, but about 9 months after I arrived in Vientiane this changed to a fully voluntary model. These changes reflected challenges that the project was going through with sustaining volunteer numbers, their relationship with the school community, and changing volunteer interests and demographics.

At the core of the volunteer team was a strong friendship group of 7 or 8 young people in their early to mid-twenties, several of whom belonged to one family and many of whom had known each other before becoming volunteers. None of these young people lived in the project's home village. Around this central group of volunteers there was a wider group of less regular volunteers some of whom lived in the village and some of whom were friends and/or relatives of the core group. In addition there was a further group of people who had

²⁴ http://pvg-laos.blogspot.com/2009_04_01_archive.html (Accessed: 21st May 2014)

previously been volunteers but, usually as a result of increasing time pressure from jobs and families, were not active in the organisation. These ex-volunteers returned occasionally, usually for social events.

Dongsavat Children and Youth Development Centre (DC&YDC)

DC&YDC is a youth organisation set up in 2010 in Ban Dongsavat, an urban village 8km from the centre of Vientiane Capital City. Although Ban Dongsavat is still within the city it is very different to Ban Phonsinuane. Although most of the journey to DC&YDC is along a major road, the last 2 km of the journey is a dirt road where motorbikes must take care to avoid dogs and chickens. For all of the time that I was volunteering with the project there was construction work happening on a new road and villagers talked proudly of this new road that will eventually link them to the city. A description of DC&YDC written on the LYN website gives the following background to the village and the organisation:

In urban settings, as things become more ‘westernized’ which appear to impact more on poorer families in the community. The negative impacts are increasing due to globalisation. The influence of neighbouring countries, TV and other forms of media alter perceptions of happiness, which are influencing young people and influence desires and needed. Young people are becoming more materialistic and bored, and are expressing this through increased crime, drug use, and alcohol abuse, drop out school, neglect children, children in especially difficult circumstances, and domestic abuse. Youth in the village are involved in crime, bullying, and violence²⁵.

The founder and manager of DC&YDC is Phonesay Inthaleuxay and he continues to be responsible for DC&YDC’s day to day management. Inthaleuxay is also an ex-volunteer with another LYN organisation and this organisation provided support to establish DC&YDC. DC&YDC has a management committee made up mainly of representatives from the village authority and, although independent, still receives some funding and mentorship from its ‘mother organisation’.

²⁵ <http://laoyouthnetwork.org/index.php/2-uncategorised> (Accessed: 21st May 2014)

DC&YDC is located in the village primary school, with an office complete with a bank of old computers, an activity room used mainly for art and craft activities and a library with a stage for theatre and puppet shows. Outside in the school grounds there was a concrete stage, which was used mainly for traditional Lao and hip hop dancing, and a herb garden. The organisation has three main aims: to develop a group of young volunteers who run after school and holiday activities in the primary school, to equip young people in the village with life skills that they can use to improve their lives and to provide scholarships that support poor children to come to school and take part in after school activities. Under a photo of the project on the LYN website there is a caption that reads: “Healthy, happy, well-educated children are essential to national development. DC&YDC helps develop quality youth for Laos”²⁶

Volunteers come mainly from Ban Dongsavat, although there are a small number of volunteers from outside the village who have invariably found the organisation through friends who live in the village. The volunteers are paid expenses when they take responsibility for facilitating activities with children but do not receive expenses for attending training and other volunteer activities. Two volunteers received scholarships from DC&YDC to complete their university education in exchange for daily volunteering at the project supporting the after-school activities and several other volunteers received support to enable them to either attend school or to access computer training in Thailand. In addition, one volunteer was paid a small salary to support Inthaleuxay (who also had another full-time job) in managing the core activities of the project.

DC&YDC was in a period of growth throughout the period of my fieldwork with volunteer numbers and both frequency and diversity of activities growing. The volunteer activities largely focused in the school, but there was a strong relationship with the village *wat* (temple); several of the novice monks volunteered with the project and some volunteer

²⁶ <http://laoyouthnetwork.org/index.php/2-uncategorised> (Accessed 21st May 2014)

training took place at the *wat*. There also seemed to be an increasing focus upon opportunities for volunteers to take part in activities in other places, including Thailand.

Volunteers at DC&YDC tended to be younger than volunteers at PVG. This may be related to the relative newness of the project or because it attracted young people from a specific village rather than more independent young people who travelled a longer distance to attend PVG. Mostly living outside of the city centre these young people also tended to come from families who made much of their income from farming. Although I did not specifically ask and it is difficult to accurately judge, from spending time in their homes I have the impression that volunteers at DC&YDC tended to come from less wealthy families than volunteers with PVG.

Research Methods

The complexities of understanding happiness, for both researchers and research participants, as discussed in Chapter One make it preferable to employ a variety of methods that both allows naturalistic approaches to exploring happiness and establishes opportunities for participants to pause and reflect upon their own happiness. Within the broad methodology of collaborative ethnography, as discussed above, I identified three main (and often overlapping) categories of research methods, each of which is discussed in more detail in the sections below:

- Participant observation
- Interviews
- Participative research workshops and group discussions

The table below gives an overview of how many research participants took part in interviews and workshops, although it is impossible to give an exact number of participants since, although attendance was recorded at each workshop, some young volunteers use several different names and therefore may be unknowingly counted as different people. It is also possible that a few young volunteers attended workshops at two or more organisations. All of the young volunteers who participated in an interview self-

identified as young volunteers and participated in at least one workshop. A full break-down of the workshops and attendance is provided in Appendix Three.

		Number of workshops	Total number of individuals involved
Workshops	PVG	12	24
	DC&YDC	9	36
	Other LYN organisations	3	51
Interviews	-	-	46
Total		24	157

Figure 1: overview of numbers of young volunteers participating in fieldwork activities

In this section I will briefly explain why I chose to use these three methods together and give a description of how I used them.

Participant observation

The ethnographer's primary research tool is often participant observation where the researcher becomes a participant in and an observer of the world that they are researching. Participant observation is not, however, without its critiques. Savage suggests that the prioritization of observation ignores other ways of knowing and argues that the ethnographer also comes to knowledge and understanding through the embodied and practical participation in cultural practices and everyday routines (2000:331). The phrase 'participant observation' is ambiguous since the emphasis could lie either upon simply observing research participants or upon the researcher as participant in the world that they are observing. Savage describes how, although participant observation is always imbued with the researcher's own cultural assumptions and experience, it results in knowledge that is constructed through interactions with other people and with the world (2000). This sense of participant observation with an emphasis upon the active participation of both young volunteers and researcher is reflected in the current research.

In the current research, participant observation began during the extended period in Vientiane while I arranged research permission. My fieldnotes reflect how intensely stressful and frustrating this period of time was but it also provided me with an ‘enforced’ period of *being* in Vientiane: observing, volunteering, building relationships and learning. It also provided me with an experiential opportunity for insight into the uncertainty of official processes in Laos – in particular volunteers and I drew parallels between the delays, uncertainties, unexpected twists, mistakes, frustrations and waiting involved in my permission process and the registration process that both NPAs were working through. I now believe that this period of time was invaluable because I was forced to embrace that which later became a substantive theme of my fieldwork – the notion of being with the volunteers and projects with no fixed agenda, simply allowing relationships, plans, learning to evolve organically and observing this happen.

My participant observation took the form of volunteering with PVG (04/2011 – 10/2012) and DC&YDC (11/2011 – 10/2012). At DC&YDC I had clearly defined volunteer times (two days per week, every other Saturday morning and Sunday mornings when there were activities taking place), although these times were extremely flexible depending on activities. With PVG the arrangement was even more fluid since the project activities were more irregular, but I aimed to spend at least 2 days per week at the organisation even if there was no specific activity taking place. These differences partly reflected the different cultures of the organisations and partly reflected practical concerns – for most of my time in Vientiane I lived less than a 5-minute walk from PVG and a 45-minute cycle from DC&YDC, meaning that getting to DC&YDC needed a little more planning. Yet often activities happened in both NPAs with very little notice or activities were cancelled at the last minute.

My volunteering encompassed supporting a wide range of activities that broadly divided into three groups: activities that project volunteers were facilitating with children (for example, after school activities, one-off events such as children’s day celebrations, English

classes in schools), activities for the young volunteers (for example training sessions and project meetings, traditional dancing, gardening, social events) and administrative activities (for example, writing proposals and updating forms and procedures). My role as an older foreign volunteer was inevitably different to the role of young Lao volunteers. Language in particular played a role in this: my fluency in English made me particularly useful for certain tasks (particularly proposal writing) and my lack of fluency in Lao made other tasks more difficult (for example, I was more dependent upon the other volunteers when working with children).

I tried hard to be clear with staff and volunteers from both projects that my volunteering was motivated by my research and I obtained consent to carry out participant observation, to run research workshops and conduct interviews within the project. Tensions did arise, however, between my roles as volunteer and as researcher. On one occasion a member of staff from one of the NPAs introduced me to one of their funders as “a PhD student and advisor to the project” which felt uncomfortable because it raised questions about how those involved in the projects viewed me and what they expected from me. My fieldnotes and journal also reveal a discomfort arising from my own assumptions about what makes a good project and my ongoing frustrations with some of the ways in which both projects operated. Acutely aware of the potential power dynamics involved, I resolved this dilemma by only giving advice when it was asked for and always qualifying my advice with an assertion that the staff and volunteers know far more about what works in the local context.

There was inevitably, however, an element of mutual exchange. It was clear that the volunteers saw their time participating in my research as part of their volunteer role and they gained benefits from this participation (new activities, insights, confidence) that they used in their wider volunteering activities.

S said that he had learned from my workshops. He said that I invited lots of people and only a few turned up but I still gave 100%. He said that if not many volunteers turn up at the project the

leaders only give 50% and then the new volunteers don't want to come back. (fieldnotes: 27/7/11)

Although I agreed with this assessment and I was pleased that the volunteer had expressed this insight, I would not have voiced this opinion because I did not see that it was my role. Therefore I stopped seeing an exchange (I will volunteer for the project if you will participate in my research and allow me to observe you) and started to see the process of being involved in the research as something that I could offer to the projects. This was articulated by a member of staff when I approached him to discuss his expectations of my involvement in the project:

I think that your research will help us to be clear about what we want to do in the future to help children to be happy and also the volunteers will learn about how to do research (fieldnotes: 12/9/11).

Participant observation is traditionally recorded using fieldnotes. Originally, following my commitment to participative research, I had thought that the fieldnotes that I collected from participative observation would be openly shared with research participants and, thus, provide a starting point for discussion and increased mutual understanding. However, it became apparent early in the fieldwork process that I had been naïve in this plan for three main reasons. Firstly I wrote my notes in English, which made them inaccessible to the majority of research participants. Secondly, I was surprised by how uncomfortable I felt at the idea of sharing my observations, musings and impressions, and how worried I was at the idea that writing with the idea that the notes might be shared would change what I wrote. Thirdly, though I suggested it on several occasions, most of the research participants who conceivably could have read the notes in English did not want to do so. Therefore, instead I reviewed my notes on an ongoing basis and used them to inform the interviews and group-work discussed below. Following Guba and Lincoln's technique of 'member checks', I also used observations from my fieldnotes as starting points for informal conversations with young volunteers, thus challenging my own cultural assumptions and checking out whether my interpretations were correct (1994).

Further, being there and being with people simply makes things known and possible that would otherwise be unknown and therefore impossible. Information sharing (or lack thereof) was something that caused me huge amounts of stress throughout my fieldwork. Simple things like finding out when a volunteer activity was happening were fraught with uncertainty. My initial approaches were to take responsibility for finding out myself, making constant phone-calls, feeling like I was harassing people and still missing inevitable but unpredictable changes of plans. I tried talking to key people, explaining to them what I needed to know (e.g. I really need to know when the next volunteer meeting will happen more than half an hour before it happens) or what I was interested in (e.g. it would be great if you could let me know next time you go to the temple to give alms because I would like to come with you like we discussed) and over-emphasising the cultural stereotype of the *falang* (foreigner) who needs to know every detail of what is happening in advance. Sometimes this would have an effect for a short period of time or for a specific situation but invariably we would lapse back into the original pattern before too long.

The only times when I managed to allay this frustration was when I *was there* as plans and decisions were being made and changed. If I *were there* information flowed freely and I seamlessly became a part of plans than would otherwise have remained unknown. Although it was not always possible for me to be with all of the research participants, and therefore access to information remained frustrating and many plans remained unknown, this knowledge enabled me to see a different value to participative observation, to value the times when it felt like nothing was happening and to gain a kind of intuitive understanding about how the research participants interacted with each other and made plans together about how to spend their time.

Conversations and interviews

As Kvale (1996) asks, “If you want to know how people understand their world and their lives, why not talk to them?” (p. xvii). The ethnographic tools of conversation and interviews were both important parts of this study.

I make a distinction here between conversations that occurred in an unplanned manner as part of natural interactions with young volunteers and interviews that were planned and recorded. Conversations tended to occur as part of the participant observation, ranged from a brief exchange to an extended discussion and were generally recorded after the fact in fieldnotes. Camfield et al (2009) recognise the importance of conversations, stating that they allow the researcher to “listen to respondents speaking in their own terms, rather than in the slightly artificial context of an interview or participatory exercise” (p. 11).

Depending on the strength of relationship that I had with the participant and the context of the conversation there were occasions when I asked permission to digitally record conversations, but this was a risk – sometimes this was enough to make the conversation run dry. Since I often did not have an interpreter with me during participative observation, these conversations often happened in a varying mix of Lao and English which sometimes limited understanding. However, as my language skills developed, talking between two languages offered opportunities to explore the meanings of different words and phrases.

In total I conducted interviews with 53 young people although 7 were ultimately disregarded for the purposes of this research because the young people did not self-identify as being young volunteers with NPAs. Therefore data from 46 interviews with young volunteers has been included in the analysis. A list of these interviews, including pseudonyms used for volunteers through-out this thesis can be seen in Appendix One. Of the interviewees, 28 identified themselves as female and 18 male, 44 out of 46 identified themselves as Buddhist and 44 out of 46 said that their ethnicity was either ‘Lao’ or ‘Lao Loum’ (see page 56 for a discussion about ethnicity and nationality). The distinction between volunteer and staff is not always clear and some of these young people were receiving a small salary for some of the work that they do. I also conducted 4 interviews with staff working in NPAs who do not (or no longer) consider themselves to be young volunteers which are used as background information to the research.

The interviews were semi-structured in order to provide a structure to the collection of data whilst remaining open to the exploration of unanticipated issues. One of the advantages of

interviews is that they allow participants privacy to explore details of their lives and yet some participants may feel uncomfortable with such a one-to-one setting (Tisdall et al., 2009: 75). With these contradictory possibilities in mind, I offered participants a choice and interviews were either conducted with one individual participant or with a small self-selected friendship group (generally up to a maximum of three people although on one occasion 4 friends were interviewed together). The interviews took place in a place chosen by the interviewee(s); most frequently in the NPA offices although occasionally in the participant's home or in a public space. Towards the beginning of the fieldwork period I developed an interview schedule that I discussed and tested with three volunteers from PVG and my two original young interpreters (see p. 117 for more information about interpreters). However, as the fieldwork period progressed, new questions arose and the interview schedule developed. Gerson and Horowitz (2002) suggest that while interviews start with questions, participant observation often generates questions through-out the fieldwork process. The interaction between the methods used in the current research lent itself to a flexible approach where new interview questions were added and questions that yielded less interesting information were jettisoned. The original schedule can be seen in Appendix Two along with a list of additional questions that were later added, although these served only as a guide and interviewees often took the conversation in different, but judged to be relevant, directions. Where possible I tried to go back to the participants that I had interviewed towards the beginning of the time period and do a second follow-up interview at a later date which included the additional questions and a catch-up to see if anything had changed.

Participative research workshops

With a view to establishing action learning groups in line with a Co-operative Inquiry approach, I ran initial workshops to introduce my research in each of the main sites and helped co-facilitate a series of fun “team-building” activities aimed at strengthening relationships both between me and the participants and between participants. Towards the end of the period when I was waiting for permission to start the research, I also ran a

research training workshop at PVG where we discussed research and different ways of doing research. At this research training workshop we also looked at (a simplified version of) my research questions and identified related topics and questions that the participants would like to focus on in subsequent workshops. I later conducted a similar workshop at NPA B.

However, while these groups were invaluable for collaboratively exploring the research questions and as a space for me to bring my emerging questions and observations, they never really developed into the co-researchers towards which Cooperative Inquiry aims. As I predicted in my research proposal, this approach was a starting point that developed and changed through a process of negotiation with young people and my participation in their world. There were a few important factors in this negotiation.

Firstly, the protracted first phase of my fieldwork as I waited for permission finally to begin the research put a strain upon the engagement of some participants. I had expected to be able to start the groupwork fairly soon after beginning volunteering with PVG and started talking about my plans to enthusiastic potential participants. When it became apparent that these plans would have to be delayed it was difficult to explain the need to wait and, by the time I was able to start, some volunteers had moved on or lost interest. Secondly, the fluidity of attendance at the workshops made it difficult to develop a strong group. While there was a core group of young volunteers at each NPA who attended most of the workshops there was a much wider group of young volunteers who attended only one time or sporadically. Thirdly, and possibly most crucially, I became aware that the level of engagement and participation that I had envisaged was not the same as the level of engagement and participation that the research participants (and indeed the organizations) were broadly able or willing to give. I was acutely aware of Gallacher and Gallagher's (2008) assertion that often only certain behaviour – i.e. those that are considered 'useful' to the research process – are considered to be participation, but also frustrated by my own need to collect data, the pressures of my ever-delayed timeline, my desire to complete my thesis and the tensions that these things highlighted.

Over this period I reflected often upon my motives for conducting this research and came to accept that the research is *my* research and that *I* will write up the research in order to gain *my* doctorate degree. This is not to say that the research participants were not engaged with - and at times invested in - the research process, but they never felt ownership of the research. I came to believe that in a respectful doctoral research process this was inevitable. The researcher chooses (in negotiation with participants) whether and how to participate in the lived world that they are researching and the participants choose (in negotiation with the researcher) whether and how to participate in the research process. Each has something to learn and something to teach – and the researcher has a particular responsibility for the research process in the same way that the participants have particular responsibilities in their lives. However, the extended timescale involved in research for a PhD means that participants may not be involved in the full process and their engagement may not be maintained through to seeing the final thesis findings. I therefore tried to build benefits into the research process and the mutual learning that occurred took many different interrelated forms, depending upon the individuals and organisations involved, including: sharing the emerging research findings; personal development; developing research skills and other skills that I was able to bring to the people and projects I worked with.

Bearing these challenges in mind, after the permission to start research finally materialized, I negotiated quite different ways of working with PVG and DC&YDC in order to fulfill this groupwork aspect of my methodology. However the basic premise of the workshops was the same: to bring young volunteers together to discuss questions related to happiness in fun and engaging ways. The workshops were broadly discussion based, but other activities such as art and drama and games were used to generate discussion. I planned the workshops and decided upon the themes covered based upon a combination of their relevance to my research questions and the expressed interests of the young volunteers.²⁷ Many of the

²⁷ At the first workshop at both PVG and DCYDC I facilitated an exercise where we looked at simplified versions of my research questions and started to prioritise some of the things that they thought that it was important for me to explore.

exercises were recorded using ‘flip-chart’ paper or worksheets that I subsequently translated with my interpreters and typed up. An interpreter was with me during each workshop to translate the discussion where necessary and all of these discussions were recorded and later transcribed, at which stage additional translation was often necessary. I also recorded reflexive fieldnotes after every workshop that both helped me plan and improve subsequent workshops and serve as important data for the research. While these workshops did not meet my initial expectations in terms of the CI model of research they were incredibly valuable. The young volunteers engaged enthusiastically, sharing ideas and opinions and, once they began to feel comfortable with me, openly disagreeing and debating with each other. The workshops also gave me an invaluable opportunity to observe the research participants interact with each other and the informal parts of the workshops such as coffee breaks and the inevitable shared lunch eaten on a rush mat on the floor were as interesting as the facilitated activities.

In PVG the groupwork was not only affected by my changing timeline but also by the changing context in the project and falling volunteer numbers across the period of fieldwork. In my first months volunteering with PVG there were three core volunteers who were paid a small wage to support the project and were enthusiastic to support me to organise workshops, particularly in the context of falling volunteer numbers and wanting to bring volunteers back to the project. In this period I organized two initial workshops, two team-building workshops and a research training workshop at the project, all on Saturday mornings and all well-attended, with more than 15 young people at each (see Appendix Three for a full list of workshops facilitated and numbers of attendees).

However, just as I wanted to start facilitating regular workshops, a decision was made by the director and core volunteers to abolish the paid volunteer roles. This decision meant that there was no longer a regular presence at the project centre and volunteers had less time for the practical support that I needed to organise workshops and ensure attendance. We agreed that I would continue to organise one workshop per fortnight on a Saturday morning and 3 more workshops happened on approximately this basis, but falling attendance numbers and

plans that changed frustratingly frequently leaving long gaps between workshops left me feeling that there was little consistency, even though there was a small core group of 5 or 6 young people who had attended every workshop. At a project meeting attended by 4 of these regular participants I raised my frustrations and said that I felt that interest was waning. They said that they were still very interested but that all the volunteers have so many time pressures (school, exams, family commitments, work) and that it was difficult to bring people together and to make the practical arrangements for a workshop. They suggested that we made the final three workshops that I wanted to do more like discussion groups and that we could hold them in the evening, away from the project in either one of their houses or in a public space. This reflected broader changes in the project that was moving away from being centre-based and which was focusing on a smaller, tighter volunteer team rather than recruiting new volunteers. These three discussion groups sat somewhere in between workshop and interviews. They were thematic, based upon topics of interest to the participants that had been identified during previous workshops, and were entirely discussion based, loosely structured using questions that I planned in advance. Finally, at the end of my fieldwork process I conducted one feedback workshop as part of a PVG volunteer residential where I presented some of the key themes emerging from my data, asked for feedback and facilitated two exercises to look at these themes and how they fit together.

Whereas in PVG all of the arrangements were made through the volunteers, in DC&YDC everything was mediated through the Project Manager. During the period that I volunteered and conducted research with DC&YDC, volunteer numbers were growing and activities were diversifying. Volunteers met on Saturday and sometimes Sunday mornings to take part in a range of different activities including practical tasks (such as caring for the school vegetable garden), fun activities (such as football training and traditional dancing) and training. The funding for the project stated that one aspect of this programme would be life-skills workshops and the project manager saw a possibility that he might be able to include my workshops under this heading.

This difference in perception about the purpose of the workshops was not clear to me at the beginning of the arrangement and I ran an introductory workshop that was well attended by 33 young volunteers, all of whom said that they would like to be involved in the research. Over the subsequent months, I became aware of this tension and we had several discussions about whether I was doing research or training. Inthaleuxay's opinion was that we did not need to draw clear distinctions if the workshops fitted both of our needs. I initially felt uncomfortable with the situation and first addressed the issue by offering, in my role as a volunteer with the project, to facilitate separate 'lifeskills' workshops on topics identified by the young volunteers – an offer which was taken up. However, over my time with the project I relaxed my attitude towards this issue because I observed volunteers using many things from my research workshops in their everyday lives. For example, activities that I used in research workshops were regularly recycled and adapted for work with children in school and after-school activities.

Even though there was in theory a formalised programme of activities in DC&YDC that was planned at the beginning of each month, this programme was rarely adhered to. Plans would often be changed at the very last minute, which was maybe less of a problem for most of the volunteers who lived in the village but on repeated occasions I was alerted of a cancellation half way through my 45 minute cycle ride to get to the project. Phoning in advance minimized the danger of this happening but it was not always possible to know who the right person to phone was. Since the majority of the volunteers lived in the village in which the project was based there was more consistency of participants than in PVG, but there were often multiple activities happening on the same day and people would be urgently called away to some other task. The minority of volunteers who did not live in the village were much less consistent in their attendance at the project. In DC&YDC I ran in total 8 research workshops, including 1 feedback workshop as outlined in Appendix Three.

In addition to these workshops at the two main research sites, I also facilitated 3 one-off research workshops with a total of 51 young volunteers at 3 different civil society organisations connected with the LYN and working with young volunteers in Vientiane.

Recognising the diversity even within such a seemingly specific group as young volunteers with NPAs in Vientiane, these workshops allowed a wider variety of voices to be heard in the research. In total, across the five organisations, approximately 101 young people attended research workshops that feed into this thesis.

Ethics

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) make a distinction between ‘procedural ethics’ (ethical decisions which are considered in order to get ethical clearance for a research project) and ‘ethics in practice’ (or the ‘ethically important moments’ that arise unexpectedly in the research process). However, whilst this distinction is useful it was not sufficient, since the emergent nature of my research meant that even decisions about procedural issues such as informed consent, confidentiality and child protection that were required to be made explicit at the beginning of the process in order to comply with ethical codes of conduct were in reality always-in-process, constantly being negotiated and renegotiated to meet the needs of individuals, the community and the research (see for example Renold et al. 2008; Skelton 2008; Tisdall et al. 2009). Ethical decisions were not, therefore, made purely at the beginning of the research project, but made and remade repeatedly (Tisdall et al. 2009). As Humphries and Martin (2000: 72) state “researchers grapple with ethics in grounded situations which are often in between the binary – dilemmas that a menu of ‘dos and don’ts’ does not help to resolve”.

The participatory research paradigm requires us to resist simple divisions between process and outcome, and between decisions about epistemology and those about ethics. In this worldview the researcher has an ethical responsibility to think about much more than avoiding causing harm to passive research participants. When research participants are viewed as active collaborators in the research process I believe that the researcher has an ethical responsibility to endeavour to ensure that this collaboration is a positive and/or valuable experience for participants and to endeavour to ensure that the experiences, thoughts and learning that the participants share are represented with integrity, honesty and

respect.

Through-out this research I have been committed to fulfilling the ethical requirements of the University of Edinburgh and working in a way that is aware of and sensitive to cultural differences. Meeting both of these aims simultaneously has, however, often not been a simple process since both broad attitudes to ethical (or appropriate) ways of working with children and young people and specific concepts such as child protection are different in different societies (Scotland and Laos) and in different fields of practice (academia and indigenous civil society organisations). Skelton (2008) warns that different ethical requirements may come into conflict and suggests that “ethical research guidelines could be yet another western construct that create a global discourse of ‘our way’ is the ‘right way’ to do things” (p. 29). In thinking about this I have found Renold et al.’s concept of ‘reflexive praxis’ particularly helpful as a tool for the necessary scrutiny and interrogation of ‘always-in-process’ ethical decisions (2008).

Over-arching principles and practice.

My original submission to the Edinburgh University’s School of Social and Political Science ethics committee provided a structure for all of the ethical decisions necessary to carry out the research. In my original research proposal I stated that I would follow the child protection procedures of the organisations within which my research was located, but it quickly became apparent that the two organisations in which I was largely based had only basic formal child protection guidelines that dealt solely with issues related to the physical and sexual abuse of children. In addition, the assumption was that these guidelines applied to the children with whom volunteers worked but not necessarily to the young volunteers themselves. I, therefore, identified two key experienced professionals with experience of social work in Laos who acted as sounding boards for day to day ethical doubts or questions. Any of these doubts or questions that raised potential tensions between my current thinking and the original ethics committee submission were discussed with my academic supervisors at Edinburgh University.

In keeping with my research values and paradigm, wherever possible, I involved research

participants in discussions about ethical issues. These discussions were often quite challenging because the participants were not familiar with the concept of ethics, found it difficult to understand why we had to have the conversation and wanted to move on to the ‘meat’ of the workshop or interview.

I found that the most easily understandable to discuss ethical procedures was to frame it around what would help participants to feel comfortable to take part in the research. In my first workshop I worked with the participants to write a set of ‘ground-rules’ for the group process and in subsequent workshops we used the ground-rules that had already been developed and discussed whether everyone was happy with these rules. However, it gradually became apparent that, even though they were written by young people, these ground-rules used formal language and were not immediately easy to understand. Over time, and in conversation with young interpreters, I simplified them to a set of 3 simpler principles:

- I will use the things that are said in this workshop for my research but I will never use anyone’s name or tell anyone who said what or write in such a way that you can be identified. The only time I would tell someone else something that you say is if I’m worried that you or someone else might not be safe. (Confidentiality)
- Nobody has to answer any question or take part in any activity that they don’t want to. You don’t have to say why you don’t want to. (Consent)
- There are no right answers and wrong answers to the questions that we will discuss. I am interested in what you really think and feel not what you think is the ‘right answer’. If you disagree with each other that is ok and interesting to me. Everyone’s answer is equally important. (Equity)

I stated these principles at the beginning of every workshop, group discussion or interview with research participants and then opened a space to have some discussion about them and check if everyone understood and agreed. This was an inexact science – despite my best efforts to make the participants feel comfortable, it was likely that some participants either did not understand or did not feel able to raise any questions or objections in a group

setting. Therefore the on-going discussion of ‘ethics in practice’ became particularly important.

Discussions about ‘ethics in practice’ related to specific incidents or issues that I perceived had potential ethical implications that arose during conversations, interviews or workshops. In the majority of occasions these discussions consisted of reminding the participant(s) about one of the three principles above and talking through the specific situation. Often these discussions revealed that the participants and I had very different understandings of the research and different ideas about what was ok in terms of (particularly) sharing information.

Confidentiality

Ethnographic styles of research present problems to confidentiality since research encounters are not neatly bounded but intermingle with life and conversations merge into each other. I am sure that working with other people in group situations did - depending on the individual’s relationship to others in the group and how comfortable she/he felt about talking in a group - affect what people chose to say or not say. However, the biggest challenge that I faced regarding confidentiality was explaining to the research participants and translators why it was important.

It seems fair to assume that confidentiality may be understood differently in collectivist cultures. It could be argued that this is both an ethical issue and an epistemological issue, linking back to the participatory paradigm’s assertion that knowledge is co-created through interactions. In a private correspondence (2010) Dr. Liz Eckermann from Deakin University related how she began researching quality of life in Southern Laos using an individual research tool, but has subsequently begun using group exercises since she found that an interview was never an interaction with an individual and participants would call on family and friends to ask them their opinions on questions. This was also reflected in my experience; participants were, overall, much more likely to express interest in attending group research activities than individual interviews. When I asked for volunteers to take part in interviews I offered for them to take part in pairs or very small, self-chosen,

friendship groups if that felt more comfortable and more than half (29 out of 46) of my interviews were conducted in such small groups. Even where the interview was with an individual, there was always an interpreter present. At times, much to my frustration, the interpreter and interviewee would have extended discussions about the questions and answers. When I tried to explain that this would affect the data and that I would rather that the interpreter did not get involved in these conversations, both interpreter and interviewee were confused and said that the discussion would ensure that I received a more honest answer. The location of the interviews also affected the experience. The small number of interviews that I did in family homes occasionally veered towards becoming family affairs with - despite my best efforts - family members attempting to join in with the interview, adding suggestions and reminding the interviewee of possible answers. Other interviews that took place in schools were punctuated by school-children wanting to know what was going on.

A clear theme, however, from these interruptions and collaborations was that I was the only person who was bothered by them. On every occasion when I recorded that I had expressed my frustrations and my concerns that participants were not able to share their views because of the presence and/or influence of other people, the participations expressed surprise and said that they did not mind talking in front of other people and that happiness is not something difficult or secret to talk about.

However, while the topic of this research focuses on positive aspects of life, thinking about what makes them happy could also make research participants consider what makes them sad. I am not convinced that insisting on individual interviews would have enabled participants to talk about more sensitive issues - I think that feeling comfortable was more important for most of the research participants than whether other people would hear what they were saying and my reflection is that the one to one interviews were not where the majority of research participants felt most comfortable.

A minority of the interviews did move into more sensitive territories, although these more difficult topics tended to be raised in more organic conversations. When interviews or

conversations did move into areas that I judged might be difficult for the participant I reminded them that they did not have to talk about anything that didn't feel comfortable, reminded them that the conversation was confidential and endeavoured to remain supportive and sensitive to the situation. I am sure that there were occasions where participants chose not to talk about particular aspects of their life and there were occasions where participants talked about challenges that they faced in their lives but there were no situations where I felt uncomfortable about these conversations or concerned about the immediate wellbeing or safety of the participant.

Anonymity is an issue that is strongly connected to confidentiality. In each of the two main research sites I spent significant amounts of time discussing the principles outlined above (either in the extended 'ground rules' format or the contracted three principles) and asked the young volunteers why they thought they were important. Both groups said that it was good that what they said would be 'secret' when I wrote up my research because I wouldn't use their names and said that knowing this might make people more likely to tell the truth. However, the young volunteers were not concerned about people knowing that they had been involved in the research, for example, they often shared on social media pictures of themselves participating in research activities.

At the two feedback workshops at the end of the fieldwork period I talked to each group of volunteers and staff from the NPAs about whether they wanted the name of their organisation to be included in the report. The clear consensus from all concerned was that, while they wanted their individual views to be confidential, they were keen for the participation and contribution of the projects to be recognised in the report. While initially this discussion made me a little uncomfortable since it seemed to go against the principle of confidentiality, after careful consideration of any negative implications and discussion with my supervisors I have agreed to go along with this decision. The descriptions of the two NPAs involved that are given in this chapter have been sent to the respective Directors for consideration, with a request that they also pass these descriptions on to the volunteers for comments and a statement that if I do not receive any comments I will assume that they are

satisfied with the descriptions. I have not received any response from these emails.

Through-out this thesis I refer to individuals that participated in interviews by pseudonyms as outlined in Appendix One. In rare circumstances where I was concerned that naming the organisation might compromise the anonymity of individual participants in this thesis, I have changed some minor details of their identity (age, employment, subject of study etc.) in order to preserve their anonymity. However, research participants who participated in workshops are not always identified by name since it was not always possible to identify individual volunteers from the recordings of workshops and, in these cases, when quotations are used they are identified as coming from a research workshop from either PVG, DC&YDC or one of the other three, anonymous, civil society organisation.

Consent

It became apparent early after I started doing research in Laos that gaining written consent from Lao participants was problematic because it was seen as intimidating (especially to those with no literacy skills) and was associated with a formal contract that will ‘tie them in’ to the research. I therefore decided that, in the Lao context, verbal consent is more appropriate than written consent.

Obtaining informed consent requires a certainty that participants understand, throughout the research process, both the purpose of the research and that their contribution is valued (Cooklin and Ramsden 2004 as cited in Balen et al. 2006). I would add that, in order to consent, the participants need to understand what it is that they are being asked to do – but an emergent methodology means that at the beginning of the research process it is not possible for either participant or researcher to have this knowledge. Consent, therefore, becomes located less in a single point of filling in a form and more in an open and continually negotiated relationship between researcher and participant throughout the entire research process (Schultz et al. 1997).

Verbal consent was negotiated at the beginning of the research process and before discreet research activities. There is often a concern in ethnographic research that a naturalistic research site makes it difficult to obtain the consent of everyone who might come into

contact with the researcher. Given my narrow focus on research with young volunteers this was less problematic than ethnographic research of a more open nature. However, I was careful to remain aware of new volunteers that had not met me before and repeating the description of my research and conversations about ethics regularly. I was also sensitive that my own role as a volunteer and the extensive time that I spent building relationships meant that regular participants may, at times, have forgotten that they were participating in research. I addressed this by periodically reminding participants about my research and giving them opportunities to ‘opt out’ of specific activities or withdraw consent to participate in the whole process. With the participants with whom I had the most contact this became almost a joke or a repeated performance where I would remind them that I might use our conversations for my research and they would reassure me in exaggerated tones that they knew and that I “might use their words but I would not use their names”. Similarly, after I had been conducting research workshops for a while I became aware that particular phrases that I used (“you don’t have to answer any question you don’t like” “you don’t have to tell me why who don’t want to answer”) were repeated parrot fashion in a humorous fashion. Since I had spent time building relationships with these participants we could laugh together about how I had certain ‘rules’ that were so important for my research that I had to keep repeating them, but I reflected that these interactions were broadly for my reassurance and that there was a need to find a balance between caution and being patronising. As Etherington (2007) suggests, ultimately it is important to trust our research participants’ abilities to “make the choices that are right for them when they have the information they need” (Etherington 2007:611).

In order to make judgements about whether participants were comfortable I tried to pay attention to non-verbal expressions of consent or lack of consent and trod a fine line between encouraging young volunteers to share their opinions within pushing them to say things that they were not comfortable with. My previous professional skills as a Community Education Worker were particularly useful in these groupwork situations but it was not always easy for me to pick up these cues in an unfamiliar cultural context and the extended and unexpected period spent building relationships with the volunteers turned out

to be invaluable regarding such issues.

Equity and participation

The phrase that I used that was most embraced by the research participants was “there are no right answers and no wrong answers ” and across the time I spent doing fieldwork I heard this phrase reused by several people in each of the two main research sites when they were subsequently running workshops. It was also a phrase that my interpreters repeated frequently to encourage participants who were shy or quiet.

I was repeatedly told that giving the right or expected answer is something that is valued in the Lao education system more highly than giving a thoughtful, original or critical answer. I learned that Lao people are not inclined to say anything that could create conflict or cause another person to lose face. Therefore, I tried to frame disagreement in the context of my research as something that would not do either of these things since happiness is such a subjective and complex topic, instead suggesting that differing opinions could be positive since they give us a chance to discuss and learn.

In common with consent and confidentiality, the most important factor here was respectful and trusting relationships – both between myself and participants and between participants. The time that I spent building relationship and facilitating fun activities with the groups was vital. Even though the attendance at workshops was fluid, that I obviously had close relationships with key people in the organisations (both staff and core volunteers) worked strongly in my favour, enabling trust with new participants to develop more quickly.

Learning Lao language and working with an interpreter

Before I started fieldwork I learned the Lao script in the UK and then spent 4 months in Laos intensively studying Lao language. Then, when the beginning of my fieldwork was delayed because of bureaucratic delays, I continued making every effort to learn Lao language informally through all my interactions with Lao speakers in Vientiane. I had

originally intended to use interpreters as little as possible during the fieldwork process since I was able to converse in Lao language and since many of the research participants spoke some degree of English. However, the matter of translating words and concepts related to emotions and subjective experience is far from straightforward. Despite my determined efforts to learn Lao, once living in Vientiane it quickly became apparent to me that, if I wanted to understand any more than the basic detail of information being conveyed, I was going to need to work with interpreters for all of my more formal fieldwork interactions including workshops, group discussions and interviews.

Borchgrevink (2003) suggests that the interpreter has often been made ‘invisible’ in research and that their inevitable impact is generally unacknowledged. Therefore, this section offers a brief examination of some of the research challenges related to working with interpreters and an explanation of decisions that I made regarding this issue.

Firstly, the identity of the interpreter is an important decision since, as Temple (2002) points out, “people’s lives and experiences inform their translations” (p. 846). Given that I situate my research within a research paradigm that denies the existence of a single objective reality I am essentially asking the interpreter to interpret young people’s interpretations of their own experience, thus adding an extra level of interpretation. Put another way introducing an interpreter into the research adds an extra relationship through which knowledge is co-created and, with this in mind, I decided to work with young volunteers who fitted the criteria for participating in the research and who had good English language skills as interpreters rather than with professional translators of interpreters.

Partly this was a pragmatic decision. There are few professional translators or interpreters in Laos and these few tend to be employed by large international organizations, meaning that they are in high demand and can command a high salary which I did not have the means to provide. However, this decision was also made from a theoretical standpoint, when adding another co-creator of knowledge into the collaborative mix of the research process makes more sense when that person is also a research participant and therefore their input is - after taking account of the challenges outlined below – to be welcomed rather

than something to eliminate. In this way I made a conscious choice for the process of interpretation to become a part of the conversation of the research.

Through my contacts in Vientiane I recruited two young volunteers whose English language was excellent and who were volunteers with different organizations (not those involved in this research) who became my most regular interpreters for interviews and research workshops. After taking advice from Lao friends, I paid these two young people a wage in line with a generous local salary. In addition, several of the young volunteers from the two NPAs most involved in this research spoke very good English and interpreted on a more ad hoc basis in group discussions and occasionally interviews/workshops. I discussed payment with this small pool of young people but they refused individual payment and so I decided to make a small donation to activity programmes run for children at both of the NPAs in lieu of this fee.

There is significant discussion in the literature (Borchgrevink 2003; Pitchforth and van Teijlingen 2005) about the things that an interpreter needs to know in order not to jeopardise the validity of the research. These include:

- An understanding of the research
- An understanding of what is expected of them in this piece of research
- A clear shared understanding with the researcher of how her/his involvement will work
- An understanding of the ethical issues involved in the research

Pitchforth and van Teijlingen (2005) talk of the process of discussion and refinement with their interpreter that continued through-out their research. Key to this is the idea that the interpreter is ideally engaged with the research in more than a financial manner.

I worked closely with all of the young interpreters (and indeed all of the young people involved in the research) to ensure that, as far as possible, they had a clear understanding of what the research was about, the approach that I was taking to the research and the ethical issues related to being involved in the research. I ran an initial training session for all the

young volunteers who regularly acted as interpreters where we discussed my aims for the research and went through the interview questions. Building a strong trusting relationship with the interpreters was key and I put significant time and resources into this aspect of the research process. Each time I ran a workshop I sent the plan and materials to the interpreter a few days before and we had a discussion before the workshop about any sections that might prove challenging. These processes were extremely useful and interesting for me as they acted as an opportunity to ‘pilot’ my questions and activities and there were occasions when young interpreters were able to tell me in advance that something was too complicated or unclear. There were, however, situations where young volunteers unexpectedly stepped into the role of interpreter with little preparation and in these situations I tried to provide essential information as we went through the process, relying in these cases on the strong relationships that I had built with the research participants.

Introducing an additional person into research interactions impacts upon the data collected since we construct knowledge and meaning through language in communication with other people. The interpreters’ bias, experiences and knowledge, will inevitably impact upon the knowledge constructed. I chose to work with interpreters who were also research participants, since their inputs to the data were relevant and welcome. However, there was also the possibility that their presence and their interpretation influenced the input of others. Pitchforth and Teijlingen (2005) describe how, when they began their research, they used a ‘passive interpreter model’ where all of the questions went from the researcher through the interpreter to the participant and then answers came back through the interpreter to the researcher. After discussion between the researchers and the interpreter, however, they moved to an ‘active interpreter model’ where the interpreter took the lead in much of the conversation, summarising the conversation at key points. The researcher tape-recorded the interview so that they had the entire transcript available for additional translating. In this model the interpreter plays a more active role in the research, taking responsibility for asking ‘adequate probing questions’, a task that Kapborg and Bertero (2002) suggest is ‘difficult or even impossible’ for a researcher who is not fully familiar with the interviewee’s language and culture. I preferred to work to the active interpreter role, but in

reality my way of working with the interpreters varied depending on a variety of factors including the confidence of the interpreter, at what point in the fieldwork the interaction was taking place (towards the end the interpreters began to be more comfortable with the questions and way of working and my Lao language was improving) and the relationships between young volunteers in the interaction. I was extremely grateful for having gained a level of Lao language that enabled me to remain vigilant and have some awareness of where the conversation was going and of what the interpreter's questions and follow-up questions meant. There were times at which the interpreters gave over-enthusiastic explanations of questions that led the participant in a particular direction or offered examples of answers that were seized upon by interviewees. The relationship between researcher and interpreter was fascinating but definitely not always easy; I tried to tread a line between trusting their judgements about how to encourage participants to feel comfortable to speak openly and challenging them when I felt that they were influencing the responses in a way that was unacceptable.

The relationships between young volunteers were something with which I was particularly concerned. I tried to ensure that the two interpreters who were not from PVG or Dongsavat interpreted for individual interviews since I felt that young volunteers might not feel free to share their feelings if it was someone that they knew well interpreting for them. However, on a few occasions this was not possible and I was assured by the research participant that they were really not bothered and sometimes felt more confident to share their views with someone else that they knew and trusted there to help and support them.

Kapborg and Bertero (2002) urged the researcher to take into consideration other practical issues including how the researcher, interpreter and participants arrange themselves in different interactions and the need to remain attentive to body language, particularly that which seems incongruent with the words the interpreter is reporting, but also warn about making assumptions, where you may not fully understand the cultural cues. These are things about which I tried to remain reflexive and we talked about all of these things in training and before/after research interactions. However, in reality some of these things

were mitigated by the research design that emphasized naturalistic research and building relationships between myself and young volunteers. Often, for example, unexpected opportunities were seized to do interviews in locations (a mud hut, sitting on a rush mat in someone's kitchen, in a board-room in an NGO) where there was little opportunity to arrange people in the most positive configurations and I had to rely on existing relationships, my skills and experience of working with young people and my trust in the young volunteers who helped me with interpretation.

This relaxed and more ad hoc way of working worked well with the flexible nature of the research, but had disadvantages. Firstly the roles were not always entirely clear. Young volunteers were sometimes simultaneously interpreters and research participants, or sometimes I would be let down by an interpreter and another young volunteer would step into the role with little or no preparation. Secondly, the interpreters' English language was not as fluent as it would have been if I had hired a professional interpreter. However, my Lao language skills were of a reasonable conversational level and there were sometimes other young people in the interaction who spoke a little English. Language, interpretation and translation often became a part of the conversation as we often debated the meanings of different words and sometimes pored over dictionaries. Secondly, the interpreters arguably had less skills related to the process and ethics of being involved in research than if I had worked with professionals, a view which was clearly shared with me when, as time ran out just before I left Laos, I did hire a professional translator for one day to help me with some difficulties that I had encountered with transcription and translation. After listening to several sections of recording from interviews she told me that, if she had been involved in the research from the beginning, she would have known to ask follow-up questions that would have ensured that I had much deeper knowledge about the topic. However, whilst I'm sure that working with a professional translator or interpreter would have resulted in more detailed data in some cases, I believe that working in a more fluid manner with interpreters who fit the criteria for research participants is more in line with my collaborative methodology and participative research paradigm.

Data Management and Analysis

The participative post-positivist research paradigm, within which this research is located, denies the existence of a single knowable reality in favour of living knowledge that is co-created in interaction. The analysis that best fits with this paradigm is interpretivist; the researcher (and to a lesser degree the research participants, as discussed below) plays an active role in selecting, interpreting and shaping (in the case of the current research) the multiple ways of expressing, thinking and experiencing happiness that emerge from the data. The story that is told by this thesis is, therefore, not the only story that could be told from this data but is one coherent set of inter-connected stories that are grounded in the rich data provided by research interactions with young volunteers and mediated through my academic and personal experience as researcher.

Different research interactions were recorded in different ways. When engaging in participant observation and naturalistic interactions with young volunteers – such as conversations - I used a note-taking application on my mobile phone to record brief notes and a camera for visual reminders. I wrote field-notes up in full each evening after I returned home. Interviews, group discussions and workshops were recorded using a digital recorder. During these interactions I invariably had the support of an interpreter who translated the discussion as it progressed. Therefore, when transcribing these interactions I primarily transcribed the English language sections of the recording. However, I also spent time listening to the Lao language parts of the recordings, identifying sections that I thought might be particularly relevant and subsequently sitting down with an interpreter to translate these sections in more detail. This was important since, particularly in workshops where there was lots of information and simultaneous talking, the interpreters tended to give me a ‘flavour’ of what was happening rather than exact translations. Another technique that I used to ensure that I had accurate data from workshops was to use activities such as individual worksheets and small group-work where research participants wrote their thoughts and answers to questions. I then went through these written data-sources and translated what I could before sitting down with an interpreter to ensure than my translation

was correct and discuss any words and phrases which I did not know or which were particularly interesting.

In line with the iterative methodology that moved between different research methods with each method influencing subsequent methods, analysis of the research data started from the beginning of the fieldwork period. I used NVivo to collate and organise the data. Having all of the data in one place made it easier to immerse myself in it; I read field-notes, interview transcripts and workshop data repeatedly. I recorded my thoughts on reading the data as part of a reflexive diary and discussed my thoughts, insights and observations with research participants during research workshops and whilst engaging in participant observation. These ongoing conversations impacted in a naturalistic manner upon the methodology as it emerged; common answers emerging from interviews influenced topics explored in workshops and insights from workshops and conversations resulted in new questions added to the interview schedule.

As described in Chapter Five, whilst still in Vientiane I conducted a thematic analysis of the things that young volunteers said were important for their happiness. In my MSc. dissertation (McMellon, unpublished) I discussed the importance of involving research participants in the research analysis, and this process reflected my attempt to carry this ethical and political principle into practice. The themes emerged from an iterative process of my preliminary coding of the data based upon commonalities that I observed and conversations with research participants. At two feedback workshops with research participants (one at PVG and one at DC&YDC) I presented my initial themes and we discussed firstly whether they were the correct themes for me to be looking at, secondly whether my understanding of their importance was correct and, secondly, the connections between them.

When I returned to Scotland after completing fieldwork, the thematic analysis provided a starting place for an ethnographic reading of the data focusing upon the meanings beneath these themes and the things that research participants say and do that reveal the shared beliefs that they hold about the concept of happiness. In feedback workshops with research

participants, I had already begun to look at the links between the themes and I had seen that these connections were numerous and depended upon different understandings of why the different themes were important. The three models of happiness identified in Chapter Four emerged from this observation and a return to the words and expressions that the research volunteers used to express happiness. However, I felt that the models did not go far enough and I kept coming back to the normative beliefs that clearly emerged most clearly from my fieldnotes and the naturalistic interactions where young volunteers were at their least guarded. Once I started to see three patterns of normative beliefs about happiness – that ultimately became the three ‘happiness scripts’ identified and discussed in Chapter Six - emerge I realised that I could also trace these patterns back through the data that was elicited from interviews and workshops. However, I was aware of Abu-Lughod’s (1991) warning to put enough structure upon the data whilst acknowledging the messy realities of people’s lives to be seen in the research. While the three happiness scripts offer three common meanings that the research participants held about happiness, the ethnographic reading of the data also uncovered individual stories that challenged both the researcher and the research participants to look beyond these scripts and these particular stories are discussed in Chapter Seven. Mirroring the iterative methodology, the theoretical foci of time and location described in Chapter One emerged in the iterative interaction between thematic analysis, ethnographic reading and literature review as a useful framework to reflect upon these different levels of thinking about happiness.

Through-out this thesis quotations from the broader body of data are used to evidence and illustrate the research findings. The particular quotations used have been selected reflectively either because they illustrate a theme that is common in the data generated across interactions with multiple participants or because it illustrates an interaction that is in some way unusual amongst the wider data. I have endeavoured to make clear within the text which of these is the case for the different quotations used.

Conclusions

One of the fundamental principles of Guba and Lincoln's (1994) post-positivist research paradigm, within which this chapter locates the current research, is that everything is interconnected and therefore it is particularly important that the multiple aspects of this methodology fit together in a cohesive and transparent fashion. The research questions guided my decisions about the information that was collected and the research values guided my decisions about how it was collected.

Lincoln and Guba's principle of interconnectivity also points to the impossibility of drawing clear straight lines between cause and effect since the interconnected whole is multiple, emergent and often unclear. Therefore, as outlined in this chapter, the research values guided not only decisions made at the beginning of the research but also the day to day decisions made throughout the process of conducting fieldwork.

Along with Heron and Reason (1997), the current research locates the discovery of knowledge in interactions between people and therefore places participation at the centre of the research process. The combination of ethnography, interviews and participative research workshops was developed in order to both answer the research questions and mitigate some of the concerns about participation raised in the literature.

This chapter outlines decisions made about the research sites, the methods used and how these methods developed over time, the ethical considerations inherent in the research and the challenges of working with interpreters to translate data across languages. I faced challenges in all of these areas and made decisions that deviated from the original way that I had envisaged the research. However, the common guiding compasses of research aim, questions and values enabled me to maintain cohesion between the different aspects of the methodology.

Chapter Four: Expressing happiness

Introduction

Language, experience and culture are intricately entwined; one of the key ways that we experience our realities is through language and “sociologists have long argued that language constructs the social world at the same time as it describes it” (Temple 2002: 844). Therefore, the ways that people express happiness tell us about the ways that they think about happiness. However words are not passive tools that can be translated between languages without thought given to anything except accuracy (Borchgrevink, 2003) and yet Wierzbicka states that “the glibness with which linguistic differences are at times denied in the current literature on happiness can be quite astonishing” (2004:36).

This chapter examines the language that research participants use to express happiness and what this reveals about how young Lao volunteers conceptualise happiness. In particular this chapter:

- Explores the challenges of translating happiness across cultures.
- Identifies the most common words that research participants use to express happiness and the differences between situations in which young volunteers use these words.
- Discusses the metaphors that research participants use when they talk about happiness.
- Uses the theoretical lenses of time and location to identify the three most common conceptual models that young volunteers use to represent the abstract form of happiness; ‘becoming happy’, ‘being happy’ and ‘happy being with others’.

Happiness or *kwaam-suk*?

Borchgrevink (2003) illustrates the challenges of translating language representing emotions by citing an example given by Phillips (1960) where research participants use a range of different words to express emotions similar to the emotion ‘anger’.

- angry towards another person without expressing it;
- angry at a situation one is entangled in;
- angry at the action of another person, but not at the person himself;
- angry all the time, as an inherent character trait;
- angry, with the desire to hurt someone who has done something harmful towards oneself.

While the difference between these terms was well understood by Phillips’ interpreter, he lacked a grasp of the range and variations of English terms to allow him to translate these meanings. Instead he simply used the word ‘angry’ to cover all of them.

(Phillips, 1960; p. 300 as cited in Borchgrevink 2003; p. 111)

Similarly Wierzbicka, despite suggesting that there is a widespread assumption in the literature on happiness that happiness can be straight-forwardly compared across different cultures and languages, identifies important differences between ‘happiness’ in English and terms in other languages that are generally considered to be equivalent. One of these differences relates to the relationship between the noun ‘happiness’ and the adjective ‘happy’, which are often considered to be equivalent in English and yet which, in other languages, are often translated using completely different words²⁸. Another difference relates to the wide range of positive emotions covered by the words ‘happy’ and ‘happiness’ in English language, where other language near equivalents often refer to more

²⁸ So, for example, according to Wierzbicka (2003, 2004), in French language, ‘happiness’ could be translated as ‘bonheur’ whereas ‘happy’ might be translated as ‘heureux’.

specific or narrow emotional experiences. In particular, Wierzbicka suggests that it is possible to be ‘a little happy’ or ‘very happy’ while, according to Wierzbicka, many near equivalent terms in other languages are not gradable (2004)

The challenges of translating emotions identified by both Borchgrevink (2003) and Wierzbicka (2003,2004) resonate with my experience of working with translators and Lao English speakers in Vientiane, where I rapidly became aware that a range of different Lao words were being translated as “happiness” or “happy” and that different young volunteers were talking about happiness in conceptually different ways.

One possible way to circumnavigate the challenge of translating the word ‘happiness’ would be to state that this research is not about how young volunteers understand ‘happiness’ but about how they understand ‘*kwaam-suk*’, the word that is most commonly given as the nearest Lao translation for ‘happiness’. Having argued for the need to study particular contexts, it is tempting to suggest that there are two distinct concepts (*happiness* and *kwaam-suk*) and that I am studying *kwaam-suk* and translating it as happiness purely in order to make my research accessible to the English speaking reader. This would certainly fit best with Wierzbicka’s (2004) concerns about the dangers of assuming the correspondence between two words for emotions in different languages that are commonly translated as each other. However, this solution does not fit with my observations and the young volunteer’s self-reports of their complex experiences and understandings of *happiness* and *kwaam-suk* in a multi-lingual and rapidly globalising context.

On one of my first visits to one of the Lao Youth Network projects I was being shown around by two young volunteers. Colourful murals, designed and painted by young volunteers, adorned many of the walls and we discussed some of these pictures. One wall had the letters “GNH” painted in large letters alongside the English phrase “A Dream Village” above a depiction of a traditional Lao *baci* ceremony that is an important part of

Lao life, commonly performed in Lao families and communities on all important dates and at times of transition²⁹.



Figure 2: photo showing "Gross National Happiness" depicted in a mural designed by young Lao volunteers in Vientiane

I innocently asked what GNH meant. One of the volunteers looked at me with incredulity and said “Gross National Happiness” and I immediately interpreted the look on his face to suggest that he didn’t think much of me as a happiness researcher if I didn’t know about GNH. My truth, of course, was that I was not expecting to see anything about Gross National Happiness in this context and I was particularly surprised to see it written in the English language when the vast majority of the text on the murals was in Lao script. The young man who showed me around the project did not speak good English but, as a result of exposure to the idea through his volunteer work, he was familiar in English language

²⁹ See Ngaosyvatt, 1990, for a detailed description of a *baci* ceremony. For more discussion about the link between *baci* ceremony and the beliefs that young volunteers hold about happiness see p. 196.

with both the phrases “Gross National Happiness” and also “Genuine National Happiness” which has been used in Laos by PADETC (see PADETC, 2008; 2009). He told me that the mural had been designed by a group of young volunteers and that GNH was something that they had discussed in volunteer meetings and considered to be connected enough with the project to merit inclusion.

As the story above illustrates, *kwaam-suk* and *happiness* interweave together through-out the research. With a different group of young Lao people who were not familiar with the English word happiness, a focus purely upon *kwaam-suk* may well have been an appropriate solution to the thorny linguistic challenge of how to manage the interaction between the two terms and yet the reality is that I conducted this research in a multi-linguistic and rapidly globalising context. Some of the young people who participated in the research spoke much better English language than my Lao language, many others spoke little or no English and we utilized both languages in the research process. Therefore a few interviews were conducted entirely in English and many other conversations, interviews, discussions and workshops took place in a mixture of Lao and English, exploring, clarifying and learning words as we went along

Furthermore, while in one sense this dual-language use might be seen to be a limitation of the research, in another sense it felt entirely appropriate since the NPAs with whom the young people volunteered often seem to operate in an intersection between the language of development (which at least in Laos is English language) and the language of the communities in which they operate (which in Vientiane is predominantly Lao language although across the country also includes a myriad of minority ethnic languages). Proposals, vision statements and other official documents are written in English while interactions with communities happen in the local language. English language classes (either for volunteers or taught by volunteers to children in schools or communities) are a part of the services offered by several of the NPAs in the Lao Youth Network. Many of the volunteers are learning English and perceive knowing English language to be of vital importance for their future success and, indeed, often for their happiness. The majority of

the young volunteers involved in this research also regularly used online social networks, particularly Facebook, where English language is important for communicating with new and old friends from other countries. As I write this chapter a Lao acquaintance (not a young volunteer but someone from Vientiane and within the age range for the current research) has added a 'status' on Facebook stating, in English language, that "what is make you happy you should looking for" and different Facebook friends have commented on this status in English, Thai and Lao.

Another example of this confusing fluidity between languages can be seen in the national consultation carried out for the AEPF that is described on page 66. The formal theme of the forum, first developed in English language, was 'Solidarity Against Poverty and for Sustainable Development'. As part of the preparation for the event, consultation events were organised with different groups of people from Lao society in all the provinces of the country. The Lao vision statement drafted after the Forum described the linguistic challenges that the consultation faced in the following way:

The consultative process has been participatory, non-threatening and culturally sensitive and appropriate, taking the participants through a process of understanding complex concepts of 'sustainable development' (using the Lao term 'khuam suk' or 'happiness' or 'well-being') and 'poverty' (using the Lao term 'khuam thuk' or 'suffering'). This is because the Lao understanding of 'khuam suk' and 'kuam thuk' is multi-dimensional in all its manifestations of physical, material, mental/emotional, and spiritual 'happiness/well-being' or 'suffering/poverty' and reflects a very strong desire for 'balance' in their personal, communal and societal life (AEPF9 2012:4).

The translation and conflation of the different concepts across different languages in this consultation is problematic and yet somewhat inevitable. The consultation seeks to enable the voices of Lao people to inform an international conference being held in Laos.

Development concepts do not easily translate into local languages³⁰ and new words or phrases have often been adopted or adapted by development professionals that are not commonly used by Lao people in their everyday lives. Yet, if development is to take consultation seriously, it needs to find ways to connect these concepts to people's everyday language and experience. It is, however, important to remember that any particular translation is a choice and that, as we will see through-out this thesis, it is important to be aware that different ways of presenting and promoting happiness can be used strategically for particular political emphasis or impact. "Sustainable development", "happiness" and "wellbeing" are not considered equivalent terms in the English language and yet in the translation for the national consultation outline in the quotation above, a judgement has been made that *kwaam-suk*, although generally translated as happiness, is the best word to be used to ask Lao people about sustainable development. To be clear, I am not suggesting that this is a wrong translation, simply that it is one possible translation among others and that it was made in the context, already discussed, of a growing interest in the concept of happiness among some Lao civil society groups.

As has been seen on page 41, international development policy does compare happiness across cultures and languages, yet these challenges of translation further highlight the challenges in such comparisons. One of the aims of the current research is to move towards a deeper understanding of how people think about *kwaam suk*/ happiness in their everyday lives in order to gain knowledge about what exactly it is that figures in these global comparisons. The challenge therefore becomes how to think about this positive emotional experience that includes *kwaam-suk* and happiness.

³⁰ This situation is further complicated by the high numbers of people living in Laos whose first language is not Lao, although no information is available about how the national consultation dealt with the challenges that this situation presents.

One possible solution to this challenge is to look beyond the words used to represent emotional experience to the conceptual structures that frame this experience. Nussbaum suggests that every emotional experience includes a cognitive evaluation that the object of the emotion is important for our wellbeing (2001). Wierzbicka (2003) agrees that emotional experience consists of both cognitive and affective experience, further suggesting that, while words for emotional experience are not comparable across languages, the simply expressed thoughts and feelings related to these emotional experiences are common across all languages and cultures. She suggests that these cognitive and affective “scenarios” are combined and categorized in different ways in different cultures to make up all of the different words and phrases used across different languages to represent emotional experience.

If an anthropologist or a bilingual local person translates the most relevant local word or expression as either *sadness* or *grief*, this does not mean that this is what the local word or expression really means. It is not unreasonable, however, to assume that a word or expression translated repeatedly by words like *sadness*, *grief*, *heartbreak*, *unhappiness*, and so forth, includes the semantic component “this person feels something bad” (2003:588).

Wierzbicka’s theory of ‘universal human concepts’ outlined in the above quotation is ultimately problematic. It is unclear how the delineation is made between complex concepts such as ‘happiness’ that are considered relative across different cultures and simple concepts such as ‘good’ that are considered universal. For example, Nussbaum discusses how different writers in different times can use the word ‘good’ to relate to either pleasure or value (2004). In addition, the idea of a universal set of concepts related to subjective and emotional experience sits uncomfortably with the post-positivist research paradigm described in the previous chapter which is based upon an assumption that there is no single objective and reducible reality; instead there are many equally valid and holistic realities (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 37). However, as a tool to explore the cultural and linguistic challenges of translating emotional experience and emotional concepts, the structure that Wierzbicka suggests of identifying simpler common thoughts and feelings upon which the emotional experience is predicated is useful. Using Wierzbicka’s suggestions, such simpler

common feelings and thoughts about the positive emotional experience that includes both happiness and *kwaam-suk* are likely to include ‘feeling good’ and ‘thinking that good things have happened/ are happening/will happen’ and ‘thinking that things that I wanted have happened/ are happening/will happen’.

I used these thoughts and feelings that Wierzbicka identifies in order to inform the questions that I asked research participants and the ways that I talked about happiness with them so as not to make an assumption that there was an equivalence between happiness and *kwaam-suk*. Over the course of the fieldwork period I used a variety of different terms including ‘happiness’ and ‘happy’ in English, *ci-vit dii* (‘good life’) and *heu-seuk dii* (‘good feelings’) in Lao language in order to develop an understanding of this broader concept that embraces both happiness and *kwaam-suk*. In addition, other shared thoughts and feelings about the positive emotional experience that is referred to using the words happiness and *kwaam-suk* are identified throughout the thesis.

Translating words

We begin with words: What words are used to talk about emotion, how are they related, and what are the features of the cognitive realm of emotion? (Heider 1991:4)

However, in order to begin to identify these common thoughts and feelings about positive emotional experience it is necessary to first take a step back and examine the words that young Lao volunteers use to express happiness. As discussed above, however, Wierzbicka warns that “as soon as we name an experience or emotion it is already filtered through a culturally informed conceptual schema” and therefore particular care must be taken to try to understand what these words mean to the people who use them (2003: 585). To this end, Heider (1991) who studied the comparative ‘emotion lexicons’ of three ethnic groups in Indonesia, suggests starting with a method of ‘mapping’ words that people use to speak about the emotions, so that this map can be used as a reference point in discussing the

experience of emotions In the spirit of such a map, this section identifies the words most commonly used by research participants that were translated as ‘happy’ or ‘happiness’ and other common words that they used to talk about the things that make life good .

Through-out the fieldwork period I recorded the different Lao language words that research participants used conversationally to describe positive feelings or times when good things happened, paying particular attention to those words that were translated as ‘happiness’ or ‘happy’. Further to this, in an early research workshop with young volunteers at each PVG and DC&YDC I asked them to ‘brainstorm’ how they felt when life was good. Some of the answers to this exercise were concrete examples of situations, which I fed into the thematic analysis of the things that young volunteers say make them happy discussed in Chapter Five, but many answers were single words or metaphors related to positive subjective experience.

A list of six regularly repeated words emerged from the combination of this group activity and conversations that I had over the first six months of fieldwork:

- *Mii kwaam-suk*
- *Dii jai*
- *Muan*
- *Sa-nuk sa-naan*
- *Poom Jai*
- *Sabai jai*

At first I tried to ask young volunteers about the differences between these different words but they found the question conceptually abstract and difficult to answer. I realized that the best way to understand how they thought about the different words was to ground the words in day to day experiences and so, about six months into the fieldwork, I carried out an exercise asking the two groups of volunteers to list examples of times when they had felt each of the identified words. However, before facilitating this exercise I introduced the six words and asked the young volunteers attending the workshop whether they thought that I

had the right words or if there were important Lao language words for positive subjective experience that I was missing. Firstly, in each group I asked if any of these words had identical meanings and was told by both groups that the words *muan* and *sa-nuk sa-naan* had identical meanings, the only difference being that *sa-nuk sa-naan* is originally a Thai word which has come into common usage among young Lao people in Vientiane. I therefore collapsed these two words into the single Lao-language word *muan*. I also asked whether there were any other words that should be included that had not been included and, after much discussion, the first group with whom I completed this exercise suggested the word *seung* which I subsequently added to the list. Therefore, the final list of words to be considered was:

- *Mii kwaam-suk*
- *Dii jai*
- *Muan*
- *Poom Jai*
- *Sabai jai*
- *Seung*

Given that all of these words can either be translated as happiness or are considered closely linked to happiness, it is unsurprising that there is a fairly high level of cross-over between the examples given by volunteers for the times that they have felt these 6 different feelings or emotions. *Mii-kwaam-suk* (the word most consistently translated as ‘(to have) happiness’) and *dii-jai* (most consistently translated as ‘happy’) cover the broadest range of experiences. The four other words (*muan*, *poom-jai*, *sabai-jai*, *seung*) were described using a somewhat narrower range of examples. Below I give an outline of the examples used by young volunteers in a workshop setting to illustrate each word and, based primarily upon these examples, use the conceptual lenses of time and location to explore the relative meanings of each word.

Mii-kwaam-suk

Kwaam-suk is a noun derived from the Pali word *sukha*, (as discussed on page 43) and generally translated as happiness. *Mii* means ‘to have’, *kwaam* is used to turn an adjective into a noun and, therefore, *mii kwaam-suk* is generally translated as ‘to have happiness’. When I asked young volunteers which they thought was the most important of the Lao words related to happiness, *mii kwaam-suk* was by far the most common answer in both groups and several volunteers described *kwaam-suk* as an umbrella term that includes all of the other words. *Kwaam-suk* was the word that I used most often to describe my research to non-English speakers

The first point to note about this phrase is that the 78 situations in which young volunteers said that they *mii kwaam-suk* covered a wider range than the other Lao words that they identified as related to happiness. These examples included the full range of past, present and future positive subjective experience. They also included examples that located the object of *kwaam-suk* within the individual, outwith the individual and in relationships between individuals. However, a couple of key themes emerge.

Firstly, a large majority of the examples of time when young volunteers say that they *mii kwaam-suk* involve other people. The relationships that were most commonly mentioned were family relationships, which explicitly figured in 24/78 of the examples, followed by friends (8/78) and a romantic partner (6/78). It is likely, of course, that the 48/78 examples that do not mention specific other people could take place in the company of people from one or more of these categories.

Secondly, it is notable that young volunteers tended to associate the feeling of *mii kwaam-suk* with everyday situations of being with other people rather than exceptional occasions or situations. Out of the 78 examples of situation when young volunteers said that they *mii kwaam-suk*, 29 related to generic situations of “doing activities” “being with people” or “going places with people”. The everyday is also reflected in the specific activities that young volunteers said make them feel that they *mi kwaam-suk*, which are all relatively

common activities such as eating, going to the temple, reading cartoons and playing on Facebook.

Dii Jai:

Although literally translated as ‘heart (is) good’, in conversations with bilingual Lao people, *dii jai* was usually translated as ‘happy’ or occasionally ‘glad’. Similarly to *mii-kwaam-suk*, the situations in which young volunteers said that they felt *dii jai* covered a broad range of experiences and there was no clear most common situation mentioned. These examples related to all of past, present and future happiness, although the majority were related to being happy in the present.

As with all of the Lao words related to happiness, relationships with others figured highly in the situations where young volunteers said that they would feel this way. In contrast to *mii kwaam-suk*, however, there was also an emphasis upon happiness coming from objects and commodities. Of the examples that related to other people, 11/42 related to either being given a gift from that person or that person taking the young volunteer to do a specific activity. In addition, a further 8/78 of the examples given by young volunteers say that having money makes them *dii jai*. In these examples, the happiness is likely to be located outside of the person and in the thing that they acquire or want to do. There were also, however, less frequent examples of situation where the happiness appears to be located either within the individual or in the relationship between the individual and another person such as “seeing other people smile” and “when I say that I love my mother”.

Poom jai

Poom jai is generally translated as ‘proud’ and is another word that young volunteers frequently linked to happiness. In contrast with many of the other words discussed, *poom jai* was never directly translated as happiness but research participants often said that the times that they were most happy were the times when they were also *poom jai* and both groups agreed that being *poom jai* was very important for their happiness.

My initial awareness of the importance of the word *poom jai* came from the interview question which asked young volunteers to identify the time in their life that they could remember feeling the happiest. The most common reoccurring answer to this question related to education (usually either to graduation or to passing exams) and when I asked why this had made them happy a large majority said because either it made them *poom jai* or it made their parents *poom jai*. In these instances *poom jai* is about having achieved something that young volunteers and/or their parents value and is therefore often related to cognitive assessments of past happiness; although experienced in the present *poom jai* refers to a past achievement. This also applies to other examples that young volunteers gave, as discussed below, for situations in which they feel *poom jai*.

In addition to educational achievements, other examples of things that make young volunteers *poom jai* relate to either their identity or to ‘being a good person’ or both. Three young volunteers said that they feel *poom jai* to have been born Lao and another two say that they are *poom jai* to have been born into their particular family: “I’m *poom jai* that I was born my parent’s son, even though they are not rich I’m *poom jai*”. Three young volunteers say that they are *poom jai* because they are a good person, one of these linking family and nationality, saying “I’m *poom jai* that I am a good person for my family and my nation”. In these cases the volunteer is *poom jai* about a characteristic that they possess and is therefore related to a broadly cognitive assessment of their present identity. Four others appeal to a more general assessment of their present identity, two saying “I’m *poom jai* in what I have, *poom jai* in what I do”

Sabai jai

Sabai jai was occasionally translated for me as ‘happy’ but, when I asked in more detail the difference between this and *dii jai* or *mii kwaam-suk*, *sabai jai* was described as ‘being at ease’ or as ‘when you have no problems, no worries, nothing to think about’. The word

sabai is generally translated as ‘comfortable’³¹ and therefore a literal translation of *sabai jai* could be ‘comfortable heart’.

Young volunteers provided fewer examples of times when they felt *sabai jai* than any of the other happiness words. Out of nineteen examples of situations given where young volunteers felt *sabai jai*, only nine related to other people with the others tending to be more individual. None of the examples related to external objects or commodities suggesting that *sabai jai* tends to refer to an emotional experience related to happiness that is located inside the individual.

Specific examples that were given included those that referred to giving alms or making merit at the temple (3/19) such as one volunteer who wrote “I feel *sabai jai* when I give alms to give good things to my ancestors who have died”. Two volunteers mention feeling *sabai jai* when they are sleeping and several others suggest that they feel *sabai jai* when something happens that makes their life unexpectedly easier, such as one volunteer who says that they feel *sabai jai* when “another person surprises me and done something for me” or another who says that “I feel *sabai jai* when I go to school and there is no class so I can go home and sleep in my house”.

Examples given of when young volunteers feel *sabai jai* are almost all present focused. There was a strong relationship between feeling *sabai jai*, not needing to think about anything and being able to relax. Several of the examples stated that young volunteers feel *sabai jai* when they have completed something that they believe to be the right thing to do. Except in such cases where the motivation is explicitly given, it is impossible to know anything about participant’s motivations for engaging in the different activities mentioned in the examples from this exercise. For example, it is possible that the examples of giving

³¹ For more detailed discussion of the word *sabai* see p. 232.

alms and making merit mentioned above may be extrinsically motivated by a desire to do the right thing or by may be intrinsically motivated.

Seung.

Seung was the happiness word identified by young volunteers that I found most difficult to understand. As mentioned above, in the first group discussion where I facilitated this activity the young volunteers identified *seung* as a word that I needed to include in my list of Lao words that are closely related to happiness. In that first group conversation *seung* was described to me as “happiness deep inside” and so I was confused when many of the examples given of times when young volunteers felt *seung* seemed to me to be negative situations. I discussed the word with many different Lao people who used a wide variety of English words including ‘grateful’, ‘relieved’, ‘impressed’, ‘frightened’ ‘sad’ and ‘lonely’. After many conversations and analysing the examples given below, the most equivalent English word that I can find is ‘emotional’.

Feeling *seung* can be both a positive and negative experience. For example, among the examples of situations given which related to family (11 out of 48 examples) were included “I feel *seung* when my parents tell me that they love me” and “I feel *seung* when my parents are not at home and I miss them”. Similarly, among the examples of situations related to a romantic relationship (8/48) were both “I feel *seung* when my boy/girlfriend says they love me” and “I feel *seung* when I love you but you don’t love me”.

From the examples given it seems that proximity has an important affect upon feeling *seung*, with the majority of explicitly negative examples relating to someone being either physically or emotionally far away and many of the positive examples relating very specific examples of being physically or emotionally close to people such as hugging them, being given gifts or being told that they love you. It seems that, for this group of young volunteers, feeling *seung* can relate to missing someone who is far away or feeling connected to someone who is close by.

Other examples that were given repeatedly by young volunteers included feeling *seung* when they watched a movie (10/48 - some specified a sad movie or the end of a romantic movie) and listen to a favourite song (4/10). Three young volunteers say that they feel *seung* when they go to the temple, two specifying that it is listening to the monks teaching that makes them feel this way, and another young volunteer says that they feel *seung* “when my parents give me a blessing at *Pi Mai*”³².

Seung is related to both past and present emotional experience and has both cognitive and affective aspects. Past *seung* is related to nostalgia and to thinking about something emotional that happened in the past or someone who was nearby in the past but is now far away. Examples given that were related to present *seung* related, predominantly, to emotional connection either with a person or a piece of music/a film or to spiritual connection.

Muan

Muan is usually translated as ‘enjoyable’ or ‘fun’.

Like many of the Lao words related to happiness, *muan* is relational and many of the examples of situations that young volunteers describe as *muan* involve other people. However, *muan* is the only one of the happiness words where the examples involving friends (31/125) outnumber the examples involving family (8/125). Of the example situations given, 63/125 related to specific activities such as, to list the most common examples; football, watching movies, listening to music, shopping, reading a book and eating good food. In these 63 examples, the young volunteers did not specify who (if

³² At *Pi Mai*, or Lao New Year, it is traditional for children to ceremonially thank their parents for everything that they do for them, tell them how much they love them and give them a present after which the parents give the children a blessing.

anyone) they do these activities with, but from my knowledge of their lives it seems reasonable to assume that most of these activities usually took place with other people.

There was one word that was common in this category that was rarely used across examples for any of the other happiness words and that is *lin*. The word *lin* is generally translated as ‘play’ and, although it does not have the same connotations of being related to childhood and children as ‘play’ often has in English, is generally related to activities that are both purely recreational and fun. *Lin* is a relational activity and I never heard any research participant refer to a solitary activity using the word *lin*. *Lin* was used in 39/125 of the examples given and there were many other examples that implied *lin* such as ‘joking together’, ‘joining together at a party’ and ‘teasing another person’s boy/girlfriend’. Most of the examples that use the word *lin* (with the exception of 6/125 example that referred to ‘playing’ football and 3/125 that referred to ‘playing’ Facebook or online games) did not specify a particular activity suggesting that having fun together was more important than the specifics of what was happening in that time. *Muan* is therefore generally related to things that are experienced in the present and is located in the relationships between the people involved. Of course things that were *muan* in the past can be (and were on occasion) remembered, but young volunteers experience things as *muan* in the present without need of reference to the past or future.

However, while the majority of the examples that young volunteers consider *muan* refer to day to day activities, a sizeable minority relate to ‘special’ or ‘exceptional’ activities and these are the examples that are likely to be remembered from the volunteer’s past. For example 5/125 examples refer to festivals³³ or ‘special days’ and 3/125 refer to travel to different countries. There are other examples which my observations of young volunteers

³³ Particularly *Pi Mai Lao* (Lao New Year)

lives suggest are not every-day activities, such as the 2/125 examples of ‘going to a concert’ and the 5/125 examples of ‘going to a party’.

Metaphors for happiness

The previous section examines the most common words that young volunteers use to express happiness and I now go on to explore the conceptual structures that participants used to express happiness that build upon these words. Lakoff and Kovecses suggest that if we consider emotional experience to be purely affective an assumption is made that they are, therefore, “devoid of conceptual content” (1987:195). Building on the seminal work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) they suggest that a study of the metaphors used in the ways that emotional experience is expressed reveals that such a conceptual structure does exist. Lakoff and Johnson state that “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (1980: 5). Metaphors reveal how “we *understand* the world through our *interactions* with it” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 194) and a close examination of the metaphors and metonymies used to express emotional experience reveals that our emotional experience is shaped by the conceptual structures that are culturally developed and shared (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Kovecses 1987).

Identifying and understanding the nuances of metaphor and metonymy, however, require a level of language skills that I do not possess in Lao language and therefore I was dependent upon my young interpreters and their translations to help me identify these linguistic terms. I carefully explained to my interpreters that I was interested not only in *what* the research participants said but also in *how* they said it. I was told repeatedly by Lao friends and colleagues that Lao is generally a very literal language. However, whilst it is true that the wealth of data collected during my fieldwork yielded no indications of many of the common metaphors and metonymies related to happiness that Kovecses (1991) identifies in

the English language, by the end of my time in Vientiane I was able to identify commonly used adjectives or turns of phrase that indicated certain metaphors that were present in the ways that young volunteers talked about the abstract concept of happiness. These metaphors are presented below:

When the young volunteers talked about happiness they often used language that suggested a metaphor of **happiness as close proximity**. When asked in interviews whether it is easy or difficult to be happy, those who said that it was difficult to be happy talked about happiness as ‘a long way away’ or something that is ‘not here now’, implying distance in both space and time. Conversely those who said that it is easy to be happy talked about happiness being ‘all around them’ or ‘inside them’ or ‘here every day’. In some of the happiness related words above and in the themes that emerge in the next chapter about the things that make young volunteers happy we see that being close to the people that they care about is important for young volunteers’ happiness and being far away from the people that they care about is detrimental to their happiness. Therefore, the relationship between happiness and proximity can be metaphorical (happiness is either nearby or a long way away) or literal (the people that make me happy are nearby or a long way away).

When talking about their loved ones young volunteers repeatedly said that they were happy because every day they were able to see the faces of the people that they love and, similarly, young volunteers who were separated from their family said that not being able to see their loved one’s faces every day was a barrier to their happiness. This links in to the next metaphor which is **happiness as a physical body**. Young volunteers used, in particular, the face and the heart to talk about happiness. Three young volunteers in interviews described one of the reasons that it is important to be happy as being so as to avoid having a “rotten face”. When I asked for an explanation of this phrase I was told by one young volunteer that it meant that if a person is not happy then they will be too serious, not speak and not smile which will in turn make other people unhappy. He told me that if a piece of food rots then it makes everything around it rot, so if someone that has a rotten

face he will joke with them that they should “put their face in the fridge” because you put food in the fridge to prevent it rotting and ruining all of the other food.

The relationship between the heart and happiness forms the basis of one of three happiness scripts identified and discussed in Chapter Six. The word heart is vital for understanding how Lao people communicate about emotions. Many Lao words for emotions are composite words that include the Lao word *jai* (heart)³⁴ including, as seen above, many of the words that are commonly translated as happy or that are closely related to happiness. Indeed the word *jai* itself is both literal and metonymic, referring to a physical part of the body and also relating to the core or centre of their being. When I talked to young volunteers about happiness they regularly used both the phrases ‘the things I like’ and ‘the things that my heart likes’. As I asked questions, trying to understand the distinction between these two phrases, some young volunteers told me that they meant exactly the same thing but others told me that ‘the things that my heart likes’ is stronger and related to a feeling that they experienced deep inside themselves. One young volunteer expressed this link between happiness and their heart when talking about whether it is more important to have money or to have happiness:

If we are rich but we have a poor heart³⁵ we are not happy. If we have less money but we are happy and make our family happy then we will be at ease in our heart³⁶. (interview: Som)

Another volunteer mixed two different physical representations of happiness when she explained: “when we are happy, our heart smiles” (interview: San)

Kovecses identifies a metaphor in the English language of **happiness as a disease**, citing examples of phrases that suggest that happiness is either contagious or infectious. He admits, however, that this metaphor is limited to this one particular aspect of a

³⁴ Examples of these words can be seen at <http://www.retire-asia.com/lao-heart-culture.shtml> (Accessed: 24th September 2013)

³⁵ *Tuk-jai*, meaning literally ‘heart with suffering’.

³⁶ *Sabai-jai*

disease (1991: 30). In the current research, happiness was frequently described by young volunteers as something that is transferred from person to person such that “when we see our friends happy that makes us happy too” (interview: Bui). In particular this transference of happiness was expressed in terms of smiling and, in turn, making other people smile. Although young volunteers acknowledged that smiling does not necessarily mean that a person is happy it was often referred to as an indication or expression of happiness. However, whilst this seems to reflect Kovesces’ metaphor of happiness as a disease, it seems likely that this point was literal rather than metaphoric; that happiness really is contagious, being happy can make other people happy and, in the case of the rotting face above, being sad or serious can make others sad or serious.

If we are happy we smile, we are glad and we make other people glad and smile (interview: Mou)

The final metaphor that emerged from the current research was **happiness as a moderate temperature**. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the most common adjective young volunteers used for families that make them happy is ‘warm’ (as opposed to ‘cold’) and (see page 162) the kind of heart that is most likely to make young volunteers happy is a ‘cool heart’ as opposed to a ‘hot heart’ (see page 175). ‘Warm’ relates back to close proximity and emotional support whereas ‘cool’ relates to control and slow speed. Warmth and coolness are important for happiness whereas heat and cold are detrimental to happiness. This may relate to a metonymy of **happiness as balance** where the extreme temperatures have a negative effect on happiness but both warmth and coolness are important in different contexts for making young volunteers happy.

Three conceptual models of *kwaam-suk*

The exploration of the words and metaphors that research participants use to express happiness gives us a clearer understanding of how research participants experience and understand happiness in particular circumstances. Lakoff and Kovesces (1987) suggest that we can move from metaphors used to represent happiness to prototype cognitive models

that draw metaphors together into a more cohesive system or whole. The three cognitive models presented below draw upon the identified metaphors and other data as described below in order to describe the most common conceptual forms that happiness takes for this group of young Lao volunteers.

The challenges of ascertaining whether people are talking about the same concept when they use words related to happiness is a thread that weaves through-out this thesis. In order to have a meaningful cross-cultural and cross-linguistic conversation about happiness it is vital to know not only if the same things make different people happy but also to establish some common conceptual sense of the meanings of the words that we commonly use. This point is illustrated clearly by Nussbaum (2004) who demonstrates the tension between Bentham's utilitarian concept of happiness as pleasure and Aristotle's ethical *eudaimonism* where happiness is located in making ethical choices that promote flourishing³⁷.

My experience was that young volunteers found it challenging to answer conceptual questions about happiness; to use Feldman's (2010) distinction between the form of happiness (what is happiness?) and the content of happiness (what makes people happy?), they were much more comfortable discussing the content of happiness. Indeed, when asked the question 'what is happiness?' young volunteers often answered using examples of things that make them happy. When facilitating the activity described in the previous section, where I asked volunteers to give examples of times when they felt each of the emotional experiences identified, I also asked young volunteers which of the suggested words was most important. I was told in each group, without hesitation and with absolute agreement, that the most important was *kwaam-suk*. However, when I asked why *kwaam-suk* was the most important the young volunteers found it a difficult question to answer. I,

³⁷ Nussbaum argues that Mill falls somewhere in between these two very different conceptualisations of happiness and attempts to find a conceptualisation that reconciles the importance of both Aristotle's "richness of life" and Bentham's perceived importance of pleasure and minimising suffering.

therefore, incorporated opportunities in interviews and research workshops that aimed to gain more conceptual insights into how young volunteers thought about happiness. For example, I asked a question in interviews with young volunteers about whether and why *kwaam-suk* is important. In workshops I used a more visual approach and asked the young volunteers to show me how different words related to happiness fitted together. In two workshops, one at PVG and one at DC&YDC, I gave each group of volunteers a set of words written on sheets of paper including the words listed above that describe how young volunteers felt when good things happened to them and also a range of other words that were emerging from the data as possibly relevant. I split each group into two smaller groups and asked them to choose the four most important words and the four least important words. Then I gave each small group lots of small arrows and asked them to make a visual representation of how the different words fit together. They were encouraged to leave out any words that they did not think were important. These visual representations were then used as prompts for a discussion about the relationships between the different words. From a close reading of the transcripts to these discussions, answers to questions about why *kwaam-suk* is important and other conversations with young volunteers, three common ways of thinking about the concept of happiness emerged. I have called these ways of thinking about happiness “conceptual models”.

Conceptual Model 1: Becoming Happy

In the first conceptual model of happiness that young volunteers presented happiness is the ultimate aim and a cumulative result of all other good things and feelings.

In this model happiness is something worthwhile to strive towards and is something that young volunteers hope that they will achieve once they have achieved certain goals. This conceptual model of happiness was clearly illustrated by one young volunteer when asked about why *kwaam-suk* was the most important of the words related to happiness who said that “all the other words are like steps that you have to walk up to get to *mii-kwaam-suk* which is the top step” and the other volunteers in the group agreed enthusiastically. This sets *mii-kwaam-suk* up as something exceptional and different to all of the other positive

feelings. It suggests a sense of happiness as an end towards which other positive thoughts and feelings build.

It is possible that this model was inspired by a tool that I adapted and used in interviews known as ‘the ladder of wellbeing’³⁸ to encourage young volunteers to assess their current happiness and then think about the things in their current life that give them happiness and the things that they would need in their life in order to be perfectly happy. When asked about what they would need in order to reach the tenth (top) stair of the stairway (or in other words, what they would need in order to have an absolutely happy life) young volunteers often identified something in the future, most commonly related to education, that they were aiming towards that they would need in order to be perfectly happy.

I think I stay in the middle (of the stairway). I have already passed level 6 and graduated from high school. Now I have to concentrate on moving to be an adult and I have to think about how I should live my life, how to pay attention to my study in order to achieve that next step (interview: Thang).

There was an assumption inherent in this model that happiness is something that young volunteers have not yet achieved and that it is something that they must work or strive towards. They make a cognitive assessment about the things that will bring them happiness:

To get to number ten happiness (on the stairway) I need many things - the first thing is that I am still learning, I don't yet work and don't earn money by myself so I can't support my family and repay my parents. After this I will be happy (interview: Paw).

Happiness is seen as a final destination towards which young volunteers hope to make progress. The path that leads to happiness as a final destination is, however, not always the

³⁸ After piloting the tool with translators and a small group of volunteers I adapted this tool to a ‘stairway of wellbeing’ since it was easier for participants to understand. This tool has often been used as a means for people to assess their own wellbeing or happiness (see, for example, Duc et al., 2008) . I did ask young people to assess their current level of happiness, but only as a pre-cursor to discussion about the things that they think about when making that assessment.

same and can relate to an inward journey of different emotional experiences or an external journey of achievement and acquisition in the world. This conceptual model tends to be future focused and elevates happiness to a status that is more important than other positive emotional experiences.

Conceptual Model 2: Being Happy

In contrast, the second conceptual model of happiness emphasises the possibility that young volunteers can have happiness in every present moment through controlling how they think about their current situation. This model is focused upon present happiness and locates happiness inside the individual, as either a characteristic or a choice that they can make.

In interviews I asked young volunteers whether happiness was easy or difficult to achieve and many suggested that happiness is an ongoing choice that is within their control.

It is not hard to be happy. Happiness depends on our thinking. If I need to be happy, sometimes I just smile and sometimes I forget that thing that was making me sad. If I want to be happy I only need to smile: don't think about anything. It is not hard – it depends on myself. (interview: Song)

In this model, happiness is not an ultimate goal that young volunteers will achieve after they have successfully completed a series of other steps but is something that is always accessible. Happiness does not require that everything is perfect; happiness and sadness or suffering may coexist and the only thing that young volunteers must do is control their thoughts and emotions.

In this way happiness becomes something that is every-day rather than exceptional, something to be enjoyed easily rather than something to strive towards.

For me happiness is easy because I am a person who is cheerful and so when I see something, even the small thing, it can make me happy. For example, good weather, good environment can make me happy, people smiling and bright, people have solidarity, children laughing, don't argue and no trouble. I'm happy because I am a cheerful person. (interview: Mou)

For this young volunteer happiness is part of his personality, something that comes easy and naturally to him through small every-day observations and experiences. The idea that a tendency towards happiness can be part of someone's character was raised repeatedly by young volunteers in interviews. Another stated:

(Whether happiness is easy or difficult) depends on the individual's basic level of happiness. Some people might need a lot to reach happiness – for me it's very easy, I don't need much. (Interview: Som)

Some young volunteers, however, suggest that although happiness is always available it is not necessarily easy to access it.

If we pay close attention³⁹ it is not difficult to have happiness but if we don't pay close attention it is difficult to be happy (interview: Phet)

This necessity to control the mind fits with Buddhist ideas of non-attachment to desire, which also applies to the desire for happiness. One volunteer explained that taking care of the mind involves not investing too much in either good or bad feelings, but accepting what is:

If we are in the situation of suffering or happiness then we should take care of our mind, so that we not too much in that feeling. When we...for example...when we get some money we are not too happy about it....when we lose money we are not too sad about it...we are just like ok...*bo phen nyang*⁴⁰....like that because if we buy into either emotion too much and then it will easily cause you to suffer. (interview: Toon)

³⁹ The word translated here as 'pay close attention' (*sa-ma-tii*) can also be translated as 'meditate'. In this interview I checked with the young volunteer what she meant by this word and she clarified that she meant that it is necessary to pay close attention to what is going on in the mind all through the day not just when you are sitting down in the temple to meditate.

⁴⁰ Literally translated as "it is nothing", *bo phen nyang* is a common phrase used by Lao people to mean variations of "never mind" and "it is not important".

This conceptual model of 'being happy' is therefore, present focused and locates happiness inside the individual as either a personal characteristic or as a skill that can be developed.

Conceptual Model 3: Happy being with others

The third conceptual model that young volunteers use about happiness is also present-focused but, instead of locating happiness inside the individual it locates happiness in relationships between people. In this conceptual mode happiness flows between people but you must spend time with people that you care about in order to benefit.

Reflecting the metaphor of happiness as proximity, young volunteers repeatedly told me how happiness exists simply in being with other people that they care about.

I think that the biggest happiness is to be together with a group of friends and be with the person that I love and be with all the people who understand me and understand each other. (workshop: PVG)

Young volunteers say that simply being with and going to places with people that they care about makes them happy. The specific content of this time is less important than the fact that it is relaxed and, often, unstructured time spent with others. There does not necessarily need to be something specific that happens to make the research participants happy, the happiness is located in the relationship and in the time spent together.

Conversely, with reference to this conceptual model, being alone is not conducive to happiness since happiness exists in the relationships between people. Research participants who enjoyed solitary pastimes (such as reading) were rare and acknowledged that they were unusual. Similarly several research participants who did not enjoy solitary pursuits expressed a view that it was not possible to be truly happy without other people present saying things like "I don't know if I can be really happy without someone to share the happiness with" (interview: New). Many of the young volunteers were fascinated that I travelled alone and, particularly, that I often ate on my own. They found it difficult to understand that I enjoyed eating on my own with a good book.

This conceptual model also links to the idea that happiness is contagious. It makes young volunteers happy to see other people happy. This is especially the case when they feel that they have had some part in bringing about that happiness.

Happiness is doing something...maybe it can be just a very little thing and maybe it can be a big one... but it is something that can make someone smile, maybe just only one child will smile but we can do something that makes someone happy. When I do that something it makes me feel good, makes another feel good, make everyone feel good...this is happiness. (group discussion: PVG)

However, while the sense of achievement or of having done the right thing is important in this example, research participants also talked about how just seeing their loved ones happy and being with them when they were happy could make them happy.

I'm happy when I see my family are happy. I'm happy when we smile together. (interview: Noot)

Three models making up a whole structure

These three conceptual models of 'being happy', 'becoming happy' and 'happy being with others' bears a strong resemblance to the three conceptualisations of childhood that were identified in Chapter One of 'Being', 'Becoming' and 'Belonging' (Haw 2010; Sumsion and Wong 2011). However, whilst 'Belonging' and 'Being Happy with Others' are both characterised by relationship, there are also differences between the two. Belonging denotes a particular type of relationship generally characterised by membership of a particular group. Gotz and Simone write about how this search for belonging can exclude people who are outside of the group.

Ironically, struggles for belonging often erode the basis for social and spatial cohesion. Where social collaborations do arise, these are often highly fragmented and transitory clan or gang-based formations whose motivation for organization is the perception of encroaching threat or competition for a dwindling pool of resources and opportunities (Gotz and Simone 2003:125)

Conversely, while the 'others' in 'happy being with others' may be members of groups to which the research participants belong such as, most commonly, their families, this

conceptual model is extremely inclusive and the others may even be people that the young volunteers hardly know. The most common example of this was where research participants talked about happiness being passed between themselves and people (particularly children) with whom they volunteered. This inclusivity can also be seen in the ease with which research participants called people that they had barely met their ‘friend’ (*mu*) and included them in shared activities, an observation mirroring the findings of an unpublished report by Gender Development Group⁴¹ (GDG) looking at women and migration in Laos. I personally experienced this inclusivity on numerous occasions during my fieldwork period when I was welcomed without question to spend time with research participants and their friends and family and observed the fluidity of these times spent doing often very little except enjoying each other’s company. Therefore, whilst not meaning to suggest that a sense of belonging is necessary exclusive or negative, I conclude that the happiness lies in the relationships between people rather than in allegiance to a particular group.

These conceptual models provide interrelated structures for thinking about the concept of happiness and all three models are necessary in order to approach a full understanding of the form that young Lao volunteers in Vientiane understand happiness to take. There may, indeed, be additional conceptual models that young volunteers have about happiness but I believe that these three models are the most prevalent and together offer a reasonable representation of the whole structure. The models are also not exclusive of each other. The first two models are defined by temporal aspects of happiness; ‘being happy’ focusing on present happiness and ‘becoming happy’ focusing upon happiness in the future. Neither of these two models specify where the object of the happiness is located and it could be either inside or outside of the individual; for example, a person could conceivably think that they will become happy through accumulating possessions or could think that they will become

⁴¹ Since the completion of fieldwork, GDG has completed the registration process to become an official NPA and has changed its name to Gender Development Association (GDA).

happy through spiritual enlightenment. The third model ‘happy being with others’ does not specify a temporal aspect of happiness but is instead defined by the location of happiness such that the object of happiness is always located between people. These models are not in any hierarchical relationship with each other (no one is considered more important than the others) and there is no normative sense in which research participants *should* hold one conceptual model over the others; they are purely structural representations of the most common ways that research participants understand the form of happiness. In order to approach a full understanding of how young Lao volunteers in Vientiane conceptualise happiness it is important to consider all three of these models.

Conclusions

The challenges of translating emotional experience points to the importance of paying attention to the specific words, phrases and concepts that people use to express happiness. This chapter focused upon the ways that young volunteers expressed happiness. In collaboration with research participants I identified a list of the words used to express emotions that they considered most related to happiness. The overlapping yet distinct meanings of these words and situations in which they would be used were discussed along with common metaphors used by research participants which illustrate the more nuanced ways that research participants talked about happiness

Using Feldman’s (2010) distinction between the form and content of happiness, the three conceptual models identified in this chapter build upon the words and metaphors that research participants use to express happiness in order to represent the most common abstract forms to which they implicitly refer when they talk about happiness. The two theoretical lenses of time and location are used to describe these conceptual models of ‘becoming happy’, ‘being happy’ and ‘happy being with others’. While the first two models are primarily defined by the temporal aspect of happiness that they emphasise (‘becoming happy’ emphasising future happiness and ‘being happy’ emphasising present happiness),

‘happy being with others’ is defined by its location of happiness in the relationships between people.

These models are neither exhaustive (other groups of people may use different conceptual models) nor exclusive (there are potential overlaps between the models). The conceptual models are structural rather than normative and I argue that it is necessary to consider all three models in order to approach a full understanding of how the research participants understand the form of happiness.

Chapter Five: What young volunteers say makes them happy

Introduction

While the previous chapter identifies the most common ways that young volunteers perceive the abstract form of happiness, this chapter examines the content of happiness for research participants or, in other words, the things that they say are most important for their happiness.

In particular this chapter:

- Identifies eleven themes about the most important things that research participants say make them happy, which were identified in collaboration with young volunteers.
- Organises these themes by way of the three conceptual models identified in the previous chapter and discusses why these themes are important for research participants.
- Explores the connections between the themes including the ways in which the themes can sometimes support each other and there can sometimes be tension between the themes.

Identifying the themes

Whilst in Laos I carried out a thematic analysis of the data looking specifically at the things that young volunteers said make them happy. The analysis included all of the data collected across interviews, participant observation and research workshops but drew particularly upon two activities. Firstly the “staircase of wellbeing” question which I asked 46 young

volunteers in interviews involved first rating their current life on a scale of 1-10 (1 is there are no good things in my life, 10 is my life is perfect) and then identifying the good things in their life that take them up to the step they are on and the things they would need to get them higher up the stairway. Secondly all the young volunteers that took part in an initial research workshop (84 young volunteers in 5 workshops) completed an activity based upon the Global Person generated Index (GPGI)⁴² which asked them firstly to write the 5 things that they think are most important to their happiness, to visually represent the proportional importance of these 5 things on a pie chart and finally to give three reasons why each of these things were important. The GPGI worksheets were completed individually and followed with group discussion which was recorded and transcribed. Following the iterative nature of the research workshops, some of the ideas that arose in these discussions informed topics for future workshops where they were discussed in more depth.

There were some themes that, from the beginning of my time in Laos, young Lao volunteers talked about frequently and clearly as important for their happiness. Other ideas that became themes in this analysis emerged more tentatively from a particularly interesting conversation that I went on to ask about in other conversations and then interviews or workshops to see if other young people agreed.

The twelve initial themes that I identified were:

- Having a warm family
- Having good friends
- Having a person I love and who loves me
- Being a volunteer
- Having money to use
- Having a high education

⁴² For a more detailed description of the Global Person Generated Index see Camfield and Ruta, 2007.

- Being together and going to places together
- Helping other people and society
- Being cool-hearted
- Being able to do the things that I want to do
- Having a successful future
- Doing the right thing

I presented these common answers to the question of ‘what makes young volunteers happy?’ to research participants from PVG and DC&YDC in feedback workshops towards the end of my fieldwork period. I asked some further questions of clarification and we discussed whether they thought that the answers seemed to be the correct themes that I should be focussing on in my research. The first feedback workshop took place at DC&YDC and, while they recognised and agreed with all of these answers, I was told immediately and very clearly by one young man that “having good health” was missing from the list saying that “having good health is important because having good physical health is necessary for everything”. We had a discussion about this and the other volunteers in the group all agreed with him.

Health was an issue that had only been raised by young volunteers during the fieldwork a few times. In the second feedback workshop I shared with the group that first group had added an answer to the list, saying that “having good health” is important for young volunteers’ happiness, and asked them what they thought about this. They agreed. I asked if they had any ideas why this had not come out from my fieldwork up to that point and one young man answered that “most young people don’t think very much about good health because they have it, but if they didn’t have it then they wouldn’t be able to have happiness” (workshop: DC&YDC). The implication was that young volunteers maybe take their health for granted and do not think about how important it is for their happiness.

In the second feedback workshop at Project A we discussed that “doing the right thing” is slightly different from the other answers. While the other answers are interconnected in

complex ways that I discuss below it is still possible to discuss them as distinct from each other. However the way that young volunteers understand “doing the right thing” is entirely dependent upon the other answers; doing the right thing involves a normative view of what each of these areas should look like and an assumption that if you have the right conditions and do the right things then you will be happy. In other words “doing the right thing” describes one way that all other answers become woven together into a normative narrative about what young people need to have and do in order to be happy. Therefore, for the purposes of this analysis I have abstracted this theme to Chapter Six where I discuss different normative shared scripts about the things that young Lao volunteers should do in order to be happy.

In both workshops, participants were unclear about the theme “being together and going places together” as they felt this was covered by the inclusion of the themes “warm family” “good friends” and “a person that I love who loves me” since these themes included the people that they would want to be with and go to places with. At the time of the workshop I disagreed with the participants and was keen to keep “being together and going places together” as a distinct theme because of the frequency with which the phrases *yu gap* (“being/staying with”) and *pai thiaw nam gan* (“going places together”/ “hanging out together”) occurred in the data. However, over time and as my analysis progressed I came to agree with the young volunteers’ interpretation of *yu gap le pai thiaw nam gan* as cutting across several different themes and referring more accurately to the conceptual form rather than the content of their happiness. Therefore this theme has been incorporated into the conceptual model of ‘happy being with others’ that was discussed in the previous chapter.

In addition, although “having a successful future” was one of the answers that I identified for the feedback workshops, after the comments at those workshops and ongoing analysis of the data I have decided that the original way that I presented this theme included aspects of both the conceptual form that they attributed to happiness and the content of their happiness. “Having a successful future” includes both a focus upon the concept of future happiness and an idea of what that future will need in order to be happy. The first of these

aspects has already been discussed in the conceptual model of ‘becoming happy’ (see p. 148). The second aspect was expressed by research participants in terms of the dreams that they have for future and their ability to follow their dreams.

Therefore, in response to the comments from research participants at the feedback workshops and my ongoing analysis of the data, the final list of themes to be considered in this thematic analysis are:

- Having a warm family (*mii kaup kua tii ob oon*)
- Having good friends (*mii mu tii dii*)
- Having a person I love and that loves me (*mii kon tii khoi hac le tii hac khoi*)
- Being a volunteer (*ben asasamak*)
- Having good health (*mii sukapap tii dii*)
- Having a high education (*mii gaan suk-sa sung*)
- Having money to use (*mii ngurn tii sai*)
- Being able to help other people (*dai seuay leua khon urn*)
- Being cool hearted (*ben khon jai yen*)
- Being able to do the things that I want to do (*dai het sing tii khoi mac*)
- Being able to follow my dreams (*mii kwaam-fan le pai dam kwaam-fan*)

These eleven themes cover a diverse spread of issues across the different domains of research participants’ lives. Some themes relate to an ideal functioning of a particular domain. For example “having a warm family” relates to the life domain of “family” and specifies that young volunteers perceive that if their family is warm it makes them happy. Other themes that relate to ways that young volunteers can act which (at least potentially) cut across all of the different life domains. Young volunteers suggest that if they act in these ways (or in some cases if they have the capability to act in these ways) they are more likely to be happy than if they do not. That research participants said that having their lives be these particular ways or that acting in these ways would make them happy does not, of course, mean that all of the research participants had these circumstances or capabilities in their lives.

The ways that research participants talk about each of these themes reflects the three different conceptual models that were identified in the previous chapter. It is possible that each theme could be important from the perspective of each conceptual model. For example when talking about the connection between “having a high education” and happiness, research participants mention a love of learning (being happy), the importance of education for meeting their future goals (becoming happy) and the value that they place upon their friendships with their classmates (happy being with others). However, when talking about almost all of the themes, one or other of the conceptual models is emphasised. In the example above the conceptual model emphasised is ‘becoming happy’ since education’s importance for future happiness is easily the most common connection that research participants made between education and happiness. Only two of the themes emphasise all three conceptual models equally: “having a warm family” and “being a volunteer”.

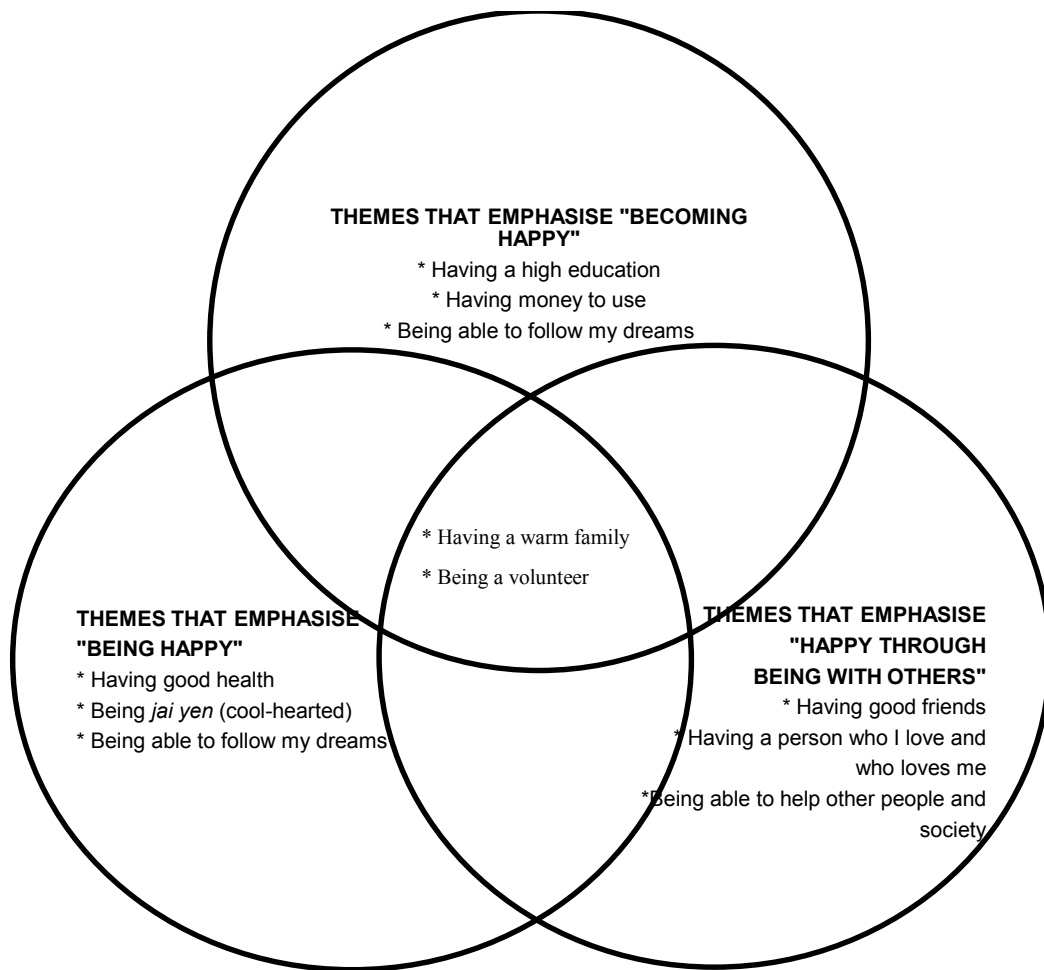


Figure 3: What research participants say make them happy organised by the predominant conceptual model.

The following section examines each of these themes to identify why research participants considered them important for their happiness.

Themes that equally relate to ‘being happy’, ‘becoming happy’ and ‘happy with other people’.

Having a warm family:

“Having a warm family” was both the most prevalent answer to the question of what young Lao volunteers think makes them happy and one which equally emphasises all three conceptual models of happiness. Without exception, every young person who completed

the GPGI worksheet mentioned family, either specifically as one of the five things that are most important for their happiness or, far less frequently, combined with other people who are important in the young people's lives. The word 'warm' (*ob oon*) was the adjective most frequently used to describe the type of family that makes young people happy and the phrase 'warm family' (*kaup kua ob oon*) was by far the most common phrase that I encountered whilst talking to young Lao volunteers about the things that are important for their happiness.

The relationship between family members was often presented as a uniquely strong and irreplaceable bond:

Family is the first step; if we have a warm family we will be successful with everything. Family is the best place when we have a problem. Family is the place that gives me happy smiles. I can't live without family. (workshop: PVG)

One young volunteer explained that her family is important for her happiness because they are "the love that I can't get from anywhere else" (workshop: PVG).

Young volunteers had a very clear and largely consistent picture of what it is to be a warm family, although this is not to say that they all had such families. When asked in a group-work exercise to describe the characteristics of a warm family, young people talked about the ways that members of a warm family treat each other and the things that a warm family do together. A warm family treats each other with respect, they understand each other, love each other and help each other when they have problems by listening and talking together, giving advice and offering practical support. They eat together, do activities together and go to places together. Some specific activities and places such as watching TV and cleaning the house or going to visit cousins in another province or going to the countryside were mentioned but young people usually used broad phrases including most commonly *yu gap* (stay together), *het git ja gam nam gam* (do activities together), *pai lin nam gan* (play together) and *pai thiaw nam gan* (go places together). In 1968 Piker wrote about *pai thiaw* in rural Thai villages as an activity whereby adult men "escape from the range of obligations and responsibilities that comprise the villager's tie first to his family of

orientation, and then to his family of procreation” (p. 783). In 1997 Mills similarly states that *pai thiaw* is a male activity but defines it slightly differently as “adventurous travel” (1997:38). It is impossible to know from the current research whether the use of this phrase has changed over time or is used differently in different places or by different groups of people, but instead of a means to escape family obligations it represented, for young volunteers, something that is important to create the type of family that they believe will make them happy – a warm family stays together and goes to places together.

Family are the people with whom most of the young volunteers spend most of their time. The happiness associated with having a warm family is intrinsically linked to being with family members. Linking to the metaphor of happiness as close proximity warm families live near to each other and have time for each other. I was repeatedly told that “in a warm family all the family stay together” and one potential cause of unhappiness in families was when one family member either had to or chose to move a long way away from the family home. Daily contact with their family was seen by many young people to be important for their happiness. Other young people said that warm families spend time together every week or every weekend and a few research participants emphasized spending special days such as birthdays and festivals together. For those who were living away from their family, missing their family came up frequently in conversations and they were always planning the next trip to see their family.

Family are the people who young volunteers expect to be with them all through their lives. Many young volunteers talked about how they owe their lives to their parents who gave birth to them and cared for them in their childhood. This debt that many expressed that they owe to their parents relates to past happiness, basing their current choices and actions upon a sense of gratitude for their birth and often for their happy childhood. When asked in interviews to think about the happiest time in their lives many young volunteers reached back into the past to their early childhood, which was often remembered as a time of freedom:

My happiest time was when I was a child because at the weekend my sisters and brothers and I like to go to the forest and forage looking for forest food; fruit, birds anything. My parents were not angry, there were no rules and no limitation and we could enjoy everything (interview: Toon)

When talking about their future happiness young volunteers frequently mentioned the need to care for their parents as their parents get older. However, looking to the future the focus of their thinking about family changed to include the future warm family that the majority hope to create. This future dream of having their own warm family fits the model of becoming happy both for those who feel that they have been born into a warm family and especially for those who do not feel that their birth family provides the warmth that they need in order to be happy.

Being a volunteer

Being a volunteer with an indigenous civil society organisation is a defining characteristic of all the participants in this research. It is also the only theme in addition to “having a warm family” where the links that research participants make between being a volunteer and happiness emphasise all three conceptual models of happiness equally.

The ways that research participants talked about being a volunteer include several links to being happy with others. The most common reason that participants gave for initially becoming a volunteer was that a friend or family member was a volunteer. Often participants did not really know what being a volunteer entailed before they became a volunteer, but they wanted to be with their friend or sibling or heard about a particular activity and wanted to try it out.

For me, before, I didn't know what a volunteer was. When I studied at high school one of my friends knew Touy and Touy was running a camp, so me and my friends went to the camp together. About 10-15 people from my class joined that camp because we had never camped before and we wanted to try it together. And then after the camp when we came back to Vientiane I went to the primary school and the first activity I joined was to read stories to the children and I see the children have fun and I like it...so I continue to be a volunteer (workshop: PVG)

For this young person being with his friends and trying new things together was the ‘hook’ that motivated him to volunteer and then being with the children was his motivation for continuing to volunteer. Once they are volunteers, volunteering also offers an opportunity for both family members, old friends and new friends to be together and do activities together.

Further to this, young volunteers said that, when they see that the things that they do as a volunteer make other people happy, this in turn makes them happy. Many young volunteers described happiness as contagious and how their volunteer role gave them opportunities to make other people happy. Talking specifically about a holiday activity programme that he was volunteering with, one participant said:

Being a volunteer makes me happy. When I make children smile
I’m happy. I’m happy to know that what I do helps the children to
develop and helps me to develop (conversation with Ting)

This volunteer is happy because he makes the children that he volunteers with happy. However he is also happy because he believes that his volunteering will have a positive future impact upon both the children and himself.

For many volunteers the connection between volunteering and happiness hinged upon the importance of personal development. They described a parallel process whereby, firstly, their volunteering gave them opportunities to learn new skills (English language, teamwork, leading groups etc.) and gain experience. Secondly they passed these skills and experience on to the children with whom they worked so that they in turn could learn and develop for the future:

When I am a volunteer I learn to be a leader who leads other...if
we develop ourselves then we will develop others (workshop:
DC&YDC)

An assumption is made by many of the research participants that the learning and experience that they get as a volunteer will be of future benefit to both themselves and the children that they volunteer with.

A few research participants extend this benefit and make a link between personal development and development in Laos.

When we volunteer we connect hand in hand to develop the community for the happiness of the community. (interview: Tik)

Tik suggests that the work that they do as volunteers not only provides opportunities for individuals to develop but also for them to work together to benefit the whole country

Other volunteers volunteered in order to get the skills and experience that they perceived that they needed in order to be accepted to study or to get a job in the future:

I volunteer because I want to get more experience and I am a curious person. I want to develop myself, my skills, my ideas. I want to learn from others. I am in the 5th year at university so it is better that I have experience when I leave university. I will use this experience when I must find a job. (interview: Maly)

In the example above Maly is not clear exactly whether she will be looking for a job that is specifically related to her volunteer work. Other volunteers had started volunteering because of a connection with the social work degree that they were studying towards. Yet other volunteers received scholarships as part of their volunteer work which helped them to afford their education. For all of these volunteers, volunteering was a stepping stone towards what they perceived to be a happy future.

However, volunteering is as much about the present as it is about the future. In a group discussion about volunteering at PVG, participants said that part of the definition of volunteering is that it is done from the heart, volunteers volunteer because it is what they want to do and because it makes them happy now to do it. Several volunteers said that they volunteer because they want to use their time well rather than wasting it doing nothing; volunteering gives them an opportunity to do something that they think is worthwhile.

(I am a volunteer because) I want to spend my time usefully, help society to have happiness and also be happy myself (workshop: DC&YDC)

Other volunteers talked about how they are valued by the organisations that they volunteered for, that they are listened to and that the relationships and responsibilities that they have as a volunteer are different to in school or in society. One volunteer talked about

how being a volunteer offered him a supportive space to try new things and to make mistakes without “losing face”⁴³.

When I am a volunteer I can try something that I have never tried before, don’t need to think about if it will be success or not, I can just try it...nobody will shout at me when I do something wrong, I just do it and get the experience. (interview: Bout)

Bout contrasts being a volunteer with being an employee and describes a different kind of relationship where there is more freedom for a volunteer to try out new things and less pressure for everything to go according to plan.

Themes that emphasise ‘becoming happy’

Having a high education:

Above I gave examples of how it is possible for the happiness associated with happiness to illustrate all three of the three identified conceptual models of happiness. Indeed research participants did on occasion explain the importance of education in all of these different ways, but the emphasis was almost always upon the importance of education for their future and their happiness in the future.

Being able to study is important for my happiness. I study for my future, so that I can pay back my parents and get more knowledge (workshop: DC&YDC)

This particular young volunteer says that he studies for his future. If he is successful in his future he will be able to pay back the debt that he owes to his parents⁴⁴ (related to maintaining happy relationships with people he cares about and therefore happy being with other people) and will gain more knowledge (related to being happy).

⁴³ The idea of “losing face”, common in Lao culture, is described by Ho (1976) thus: “Face is lost when the individual, either through his action or that of people closely related to him, fails to meet essential requirements placed upon him by virtue of the social position he occupies” (p. 867).

⁴⁴ For more discussion of this debt see page 230.

Having a high education relates to educational achievement and graduating from either high school and/or university. Young volunteers talked about having a high education frequently and passionately as things that are important for their happiness. Volunteers were extremely proud of their educational achievements and most assumed that being seen to have more education would lead to a more positive future, drawing a direct line between education and future success and happiness as in the quotation below.

when we have high education and success we can do the things that we love, if we cannot do the things that we love it means we are not successful and will not be happy (workshop:DC&YDC)

For this volunteer it seems that there is some connection between their education and the things that they want to do, although it is unclear whether this connection is general (having a high education generally opens opportunities) or specific (my particular education enables me to do the specific things that I love to do). For the majority of the research participants it seemed that the quantity of education and the fact of gaining qualifications was considered to be more important than the quality or relevance of the education. It was not at all unusual for young volunteers to be studying simultaneously for two or even three post high-school level qualifications. In one interview Tuny, a 19 year-old woman, told me that her parents wanted her to study medicine but she wanted to study banking so they had compromised and decided that she would first study banking and after she completed her degree she would go on to study for a degree in medicine. Other volunteers told how their choice of subject to study was arbitrary, based not a desire to study a particular subject. Potential students have to pass an exam in their chosen subject in order to study at the National University of Laos and, when asked why they were studying a particular subject, research participants repeatedly said that the exam for that subject happened to be on the day that they went to the University or that they had accompanied a friend or relative who wanted to take the exam and had ended up passing themselves.

The issue of the content and quality of the formal education that they received was rarely mentioned, except by a minority of young volunteers who volunteered in projects that had

a specific focus upon alternative models of education. However, this minority of young volunteers spoke passionately about the need to shift attention to quality of education. In one public meeting I watched a young female volunteer make an unusual public display of emotion as she openly wept speaking about how she had learned through her volunteering that everyone had a voice and that education could be fun if children were encouraged to participate in games and activities. She talked about her dream for the future being to train teachers in how they could engage their students in order to make education more enjoyable and relevant to the students' lives. At a different event I witnessed a group of young people (to my knowledge only two of whom were young volunteers) confidently presenting about the importance of learning critical thinking and about the course that they had taken at a private English language school in Vientiane in order to learn these skills in preparation for a scholarship programme overseas.

Volunteers, however, also talked about how not having access to education is something that can limit happiness. New, an 18 year old female volunteer had just finished high school and wanted to go to university but could not because her family did not have the money to support her to do so. New returned to her desire to go to university many times during the interview and talked about how important it is to have an education, but when I asked her what she would study if she did go to university she said that she didn't know and when I pushed her to give an answer she said that "it doesn't matter what subject I study but I must have an education". Again the emphasis was rarely upon the quality of the learning experience that they were missing out on, rather upon the presumed outcomes of the education to which they wished that they had access.

Having money to use well

When asked about the things that made them happy or that were important for their happiness, young volunteers talked a lot about having money. The most common way that volunteers talked about money was as a means of acquiring things that they did not currently have which they believed would make them happy. Therefore the focus was upon the future and upon 'becoming happy' although this was not always a distant future.

However, the level of ambivalence to the link between money and happiness was striking. Money was seen by different young volunteers, and sometimes simultaneously by the same volunteer, as both vital for happiness and as something that has a negative impact upon their happiness.

People say money is God. A lot of people think money can buy anything but for me money is important but not as important as happiness. But having money is essential because you can use the money to get access to education, for healthcare you need money. For some people they say that money can buy happiness but for me the more money you have the more worries you have because people take money from you so it might make you less happy.
(workshop: DC&YDC)

Money was often talked about in terms of a tool to enable young volunteers to become happy by enabling them to have or do something that they believed would make them happy; a means to an end rather than an end in itself. No volunteers talked about having money bringing security. Money was not seen as something important to keep or to save, but, rather, as something to use well. If one person in a group of friends had no money, I often saw others using their own money to help him/her out without any question. ‘Stingy’ (*kii neow*) was identified in a workshop at PVG as a characteristic that showed that someone was not a good friend and I observed that it was often informally used as an insult.

However young volunteers also talked about the importance of having money in order to buy the things that they and their family want or need. Some of the things that young volunteers wanted to buy were personal possessions such as (the most frequently mentioned example) mobile phones and particularly iPhones. However, when young volunteers talked explicitly about the link between money and happiness they talked more commonly about how money provides the ability to buy services and how a lack of money limits access to these services (particularly education and health services). They also talked about the need to make money in the future to support their families and the desire for a high education was often linked to the possibility of getting a good job which would enable them to earn a good salary.

I frequently heard that this need for money is a new phenomenon; young volunteers had a perception that money is more important for their happiness now than it was in previous generations. This was sometimes linked to a perception that having money can cause problems.

Boy said that the more things you have the more you have to worry about and the less things you have the more happy you are.... In the past when his parents were young in Salavan they had no money and they bartered with things that they had and shared things with each other. He agreed that now and in the future people need money, but said that money brings worries and makes it more difficult to be happy. (fieldnotes: 15/1/12)

Overall, young volunteers agreed that having a certain amount of money is vital for their happiness but that they have to use it well in order to become happy and that money does not automatically lead to happiness. One volunteer described in a discussion in a workshop that it is important to control money rather than to let money control you:

if you have money but you don't know how to use it money can be the boss and you the employee. Money is the worst boss but the best employee. (workshop: DC&YDC)

There was also a strong feeling that having money may be necessary in order to be happy but it is not sufficient. In interviews I asked young volunteers whether they would rather be rich or happy and, although most indicated that they would like to have more money than they currently have, 42 out of 46 interviewees said that they would rather be happy than rich.

I have seen rich people near my house who have no friends. They look sad because they have no friends. (interview: Vanna)

Vanna observes that rich people are not necessarily happy and implies that she considers friends to be more important for her happiness than money.

Being able to follow my dreams

Young volunteers often talked about their dreams for the future and how being able to follow these dreams made them happy. They specifically talked about having the capability of having dreams and following their dreams.

It is important for my happiness that I can follow the dream
that I dream (workshop: PVG)]

The theme of ‘being able to follow my dreams’ emphasises young volunteers’ perception of the possibility of becoming happy in the future through achieving their goals. Although this theme focuses on the conceptual model of ‘becoming happy’ it is also possible that the act of dreaming and following their dreams makes research participants happy in the present. I observed over my fieldwork period that the dreams that the young volunteers talked about were not fixed but changed frequently.

Some young volunteers talked about specific dreams that they had for the future, which included most commonly dreams related to education (achieving a high education and studying in a foreign country), relationships, career and making enough money to be able to support their family. Other research participants talked more generally about the importance of aspiring towards dreams and goals and taking action to achieve those goals.

I have a dream to be a good person who has a job. People must
have goals and people have to make their dreams come true
(workshop: DC&YDC)

Several volunteers talked about how it is possible to have multiple dreams and sometimes expressed tension between different dreams. Bee talked about how she was currently putting a lot of time and energy into helping one of her close friends to follow her dream of opening a shop. After the shop opened she planned to work in it so that her friend did not have the expense of hiring staff. Earlier in the conversation the same volunteer had clearly articulated several of her own dreams that focused around creating more flexibility in her own life and that seemed in contradiction her current focus on her friend’s dream. When I asked why she was prioritizing her friend’s dream she said that helping her friend was more important and that her friend was so close that they were like family. She explained that they were trying to find a two-storey building to rent so that she could have a studio in the same building and that maybe they will broaden the shop to include some of her interests, thus enabling them both to follow their dreams. Phou, another young volunteer, talked about the tension between her dream to live a simple life in the countryside and her

dream to provide financial support so that her younger brother could get an education. Since a simple life in the countryside would not enable her to make the money that she needed to pay her brother's educational costs, her solution was to follow one dream and continue dreaming the second dream for the future. She admitted to being worried, however, because she really believed that she would become happy through following her dream of becoming a teacher in the countryside but thought it possible that she might get distracted by the money that she would make whilst funding her brother's education.

Similarly, young volunteers talked with sadness and frustration about some of the things that limited their dreams or prevented them from following their dreams, such as a lack of money or when their dreams caused potential conflict with other things or people that they perceived to be important in their lives. Reflecting Ray's (2003) theory of the "aspirations window" it seemed that, while being able to follow their dreams made participants happy, finding that they were not able to follow their dreams resulted in sadness.

Themes that emphasise 'being happy'

Having good health

As previously discussed (see page 161) health did not emerge from the fieldwork as one of the main answers to questions about the things that make young volunteers happy. "Having good health" was added as an important theme by participants at the first feedback workshop and corroborated by those at the second feedback workshop. They suggested that the reason why they had not talked much about health in previous interactions with me was that they tend to take good health for granted unless they or people close to them have health problems. However, when they were asked directly to consider the things that are most important for their happiness having good health was a pre-requisite for many of the other things that make them happy.

If you have a lot of money but you have cancer, the money wouldn't make you happy (workshop: DC&YDC)

Where young volunteers did talk about health before the feedback workshop it tended to be related to good health enabling them to do other things that were important for their happiness or, conversely, poor health preventing them from doing things. Several other young volunteers talked specifically about sports activities being important for their happiness because they keep them healthy.

From a small number of young volunteers there was, however, some ambivalence about the direction of cause and effect; does good health makes us happy or happiness makes us healthy?

Happiness is very important. If we are not happy it will make us sick and we will tend to develop diseases. (interview, Song)

The theme of ‘Good Health’ emphasises the conceptual model of ‘being happy’ since volunteers say that they take their health for granted in the present but if they were not healthy then they would not be able to do all of the everyday things that they perceive make them happy in the present.

Being jai yen (cool-hearted)

The first time that I heard the phrase *jai yen* was in a conversation with a young volunteer when he was describing a foreign member of staff that was working with an NPA in Vientiane. He said that this member of staff got things done because she was *jai hawn* but was ill and stressed because she was not *jai yen*. He finished the conversation by saying that there are advantages to being *jai hawn* but that if she wanted to be happier she needed to learn how to be more *jai yen*.

Through-out the fieldwork period of the research I became aware of young volunteers using the phrases *jai yen* and *jai hawn* in general conversations about happiness and decided to start asking directly about these characteristics in order to understand them better and their connection to happiness. Therefore, this was not a theme initially identified by young volunteers (it did not, for example, emerge from the GPGI worksheets) but when I identified it from informal conversations and asked about it directly it emerged as an important theme.

The phrase *jai yen* and its opposite *jai hawn* translate respectively into English language as “cool-hearted” and “hot-hearted”, but the connotations in Lao language are somewhat different to those of the English translations. Although *jai yen* and *jai hawn* were often described as characteristics, there was also a sense that it is possible to learn how to be either one way or the other. *Jai yen* is associated with doing things slowly and in a relaxed manner and, therefore, has some similarities with the Lao phrase *bo phen nyang* (literally translated as “it’s nothing” and commonly used to mean “never mind” or, colloquially, “chill out”). However, different to *bo phen nyang*, *jai yen* also connotes a much more deliberate process of calm thoughtfulness employed in order to solve a problem in an unrushed manner. In contrast, *jai hawn* is related to being in a rush and speaking and doing things quickly.

jai yen is when you do things carefully, don’t rush, don’t be jai
hawn...you think before you do (workshop: DC&YDC)

Several young volunteers suggested that there are advantages both to being *jai yen* and to being *jai hawn*, that it is not ideal to be very *jai yen* or very *jai hawn* and that there might be appropriate contexts for each characteristic. *Jai hawn* relates to moving quickly and doing more than one thing at a time in an attempt to achieve more in the future. Several volunteers suggested, therefore, that in a professional context there might be times where it is better to be *jai hawn* in order to successfully complete the work more quickly and be able to move on to other things. While achieving goals potentially relates to becoming happy, research participants also relate being *jai hawn* to making mistakes and to being stressed. Conversely, being *jai yen* was related to being present, thinking and acting mindfully and slowly. Every volunteer to whom I asked the question in an interview (25) said that you are more likely to be happy if you are *jai yen*, the most common reasons given being that if you are *jai yen* you can maintain good relationships with everyone involved in the situation and that being *jai hawn* is perceived to be related to stress, losing control, having accidents and making mistakes.

Being able to do the things that I like

The phrase *dai het sing tii khoi mac* (can do the things that I like) was one of the single most common phrases used by young people when asked about the things that are important for their happiness. This theme can be seen as the present-focused equivalent of the future-focused theme ‘being able to follow my dreams’ since it relates to the idea of desire. When asked to explain why it is important to be able to do the things that they want to do, young volunteers often talked in terms of freedom and/or lack of freedom to do these things. Research participants make a distinction between the things that they ought to do and the things that they want to do. Therefore, even though the things that young volunteers want to do might be the same as the things that they perceive that they ought to do, from this perspective that thing is important because they want to do it and therefore this is the theme that is most clearly related to the individual’s desires.

There are some things that I have to do for other people. Yes...I can do them...but they are not the things that I want to do. They do not make me happy. (interview: Bee)

All of the young volunteers were able to identify specific things that they wanted to do, although the prevalence of this phrase rather than mention of the specific activities suggests that it is the broader freedom and ability to do these things, whatever they might be, is most important.

Emphasising “Happy Through Being With Others”

Having good friends:

Young volunteers talked frequently about good friends as being very important for their happiness but, unlike a warm family, there was no clear consensus about what makes a good friend. When I asked the two core volunteer groups in research workshops about what makes a good friend I collected a long list of varied responses. Most common among these were answers related to good friends helping each other when they had problems. Other responses that were given repeatedly include; good friends understand, respect and love

each other, good friends “can talk about everything” share opinions and secrets together, don’t talk behind each other’s backs and are honest with each other, good friends are not stingy with each other and help each other to pay when they are together.

Family are not chosen and their importance is tied up in complex social norms as will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. In contrast, friends (and particularly close friends) are the people that young volunteers choose to care about and friendships, although governed by their own complex norms and expectations, can represent a degree of autonomy from family. In the past and in the future young volunteers were almost always clear that loyalty is to family, but in the present young volunteers believe that happiness sometimes lies in having fun with friends. At times this can cause tensions, although young volunteers were clear that ultimately family are more important and that if their parents want them to do something then they will do it. On this issue, however, young volunteers on occasion seemed to draw a distinction between themselves and others. For example, in a volunteer workshop looking at problems for young people in Vientiane, participants suggested that one problem in their community was that some young people spent too much time drinking with their friends.

However there is not, inevitably, tension between family and friends. Many friends are subsumed into a wider sense of family and, for many of the young volunteers, family and friends were such overlapping groups that it was sometimes difficult to work out which volunteers were relations and which were close friends. Rebein (2007) suggests that the use of kinship terms among people who are not related by blood is dying out in urban areas of Laos, but this was not my experience amongst the young volunteers. Younger brother, older brother, younger sister, older sister, uncle and aunt were terms that I regularly heard used to refer to each other and to staff in the NPAs. Particularly among those young volunteers who lived in the same village, close friends often spent time with each other’s families and often the families knew each other well.

The physical and emotional proximity of friends was mentioned frequently; friends “don’t leave each other alone” and “are beside each other” during happy and difficult times.

Good friends can share our happiness and sadness. Friends are important when want to go somewhere or do something. I can't live if I don't have friends near me. (workshop: PVG)

Good friends look out for each other and there was a strong normative sense that good friends encourage each other to do good things and warn each other if they make mistakes or are making bad choices.

Young volunteers said that good friends do have fun together and do lots of different activities together. However, as noted on p. 156, previous research has noted (GDG, unpublished) that the Lao language word most usually translated as 'friend' (*mu*) covers a wide range of people including those whom in English language may be considered 'acquaintances'. Young volunteers frequently talked about doing activities with friends (*mu*) but when they talked about good friends (*mu tii dii*) the emphasis shifted somewhat from fun to support. This is not to say that young volunteers don't have fun with their close friends but that this is not the distinguishing factor of being a close friend.

Good friends take their friend's heart into their own heart.
(workshop: PVG)

Having a person who I love and who loves me:

Individual differences and the fairly broad age range of the young volunteers (14 – 26 years old) meant that there was a mix of young volunteers who talked about romantic relationships from past or present experience and others who did not have experience of romantic relationships but who spoke about this person as someone that they wanted to meet in the future. Although this relationship was considered important variously for present or future happiness, the happiness is firmly located in the relationship with the other person.

Many young volunteers talked about wanting a lover⁴⁵ and described the sort of lover that they thought would make them happy. Almost all of the statements about the links between happiness and having a lover related to emotional support from a lover who will be by their side, encourage them and make them feel wanted.

It is important for my happiness to have a lover that understands me
and accepts all the things that I am (workshop DC&YDC)

This emotional support is reciprocal. Young volunteers suggested that if their lover understands them and supports them it makes them want to give support back and several participants suggested that doing things for their lover would make them feel good or happy.

When I have someone that loves me and I love them it makes me
feel good. I feel like I have more power and I want to do good things
for them. (workshop: PVG)

The word *palang*, which is translated in the quotation above as power, is in this context was described by the interpreter as “personal power or belief in themselves gained as a result of having someone else who loves them and believes in them”.

A lover is also the relationship that represents a transition that young volunteers assume will take place from the volunteer’s family of birth to the family that they will build in the future. Lovers are chosen by the young person but female research participants in particular talked about how, depending on the family’s attitude to the relationship, there can either be pressure to end the relationship or to marry the lover. One young female volunteer told how she had decided to end a relationship with a young man that she loved very much because

⁴⁵ Interpreters and young volunteers who spoke English often translated “*mii khon ti khoi hac le tii hac khoi*” as “having a lover”, but this phrase does not necessarily have the sexual connotations that it does in the English language. Research participants very rarely talked about sex but in a discussion about relationships with research participants at PVG I asked this question directly and was told that “this person might be someone you have sex with but it might just be someone that you love very much and want to be with”. In addition, since Lao language does not differentiate between singular and plural nouns there is potential ambiguity about whether this phrase refers to “having people I love and who love me” or “having a person I love and who loves me” but every time of the multiple times that I was able to clarify this, I was assured that it referred to a single person and to a committed romantic relationship.

her family were uncomfortable that he did not have a job and wasn't able to support her. Conversely, another young female volunteer admitted that she was not entirely sure if she wanted to marry her lover but that she would do so because her parents liked him and were insistent that they should marry. In both of these cases the young woman expressed confusion based upon tensions between the concepts of "happy through being with others" and 'becoming happy'. The first said that "I am happy when I am with him but my family don't think that he is good for my future" and the second said that "he is a good man and he will take care of me and our family but I don't know if my heart wants to be with him".

Being able to help other people

There is an obvious overlap between the theme of "having a role as a volunteer" and "being able to help other people" but they are not synonymous since helping other people is only one way in which being a volunteer makes young people happy and, similarly, being a volunteer is only one way amongst many to help other people. Reflecting the distinction made by UNV (2002) between 'managed' and 'unmanaged' volunteering, in the current research, participants tended to speak about 'being a volunteer' as a relatively formalised role within an organisation whereas 'helping other people' was broader and referred to a much wider range of ad hoc, fluid and/or informal range of activities.

Helping other people again emphasizes the relational conceptual model of happiness that is 'happy being with others'. Firstly, the happiness resulting from being able to help other people was discussed at the level of a contagious feeling of pleasure:

(helping other people is) important because if you are not happy
then, when I see you, I'm not happy either (workshop: PVG)

For this research participant, seeing other people happy made them unhappy and therefore helping other people and making them happy in turn made the young volunteer happy. Secondly, at a more cognitive level research participants discussed that helping others makes them proud or offers them an opportunity to give something back to people or projects who have previously helped them.

I volunteer in order to help the children who don't have a
chance. Before, I didn't have a chance to study and then I

become a novice and now I have many chances. But I know that there are many people in Laos who don't have a chance to study and I would like to help them and that makes me happy.
(interview: Lee)

As discussed on page 200, this reciprocal help and support was often discussed using the term *sa-ma-kii* (commonly translated as solidarity, which is often used to cover a broad range of ways that people can help each other by working together and relating to each other in positive ways. *Sa-ma-kii* was collectively defined by one group of young volunteers as “helping each other in difficult and good situations, sharing good and bad feelings, understanding each other” (workshop: DC&YDC). For research participants the importance of the word *sa-ma-kii* was strongly grounded in positive relationships and relates strongly to the concept of ‘happy being with others’. The connotations of the word *sa-ma-kii* are discussed further on page 200.

Happiness in the interactions between the themes?

This chapter outlines eleven themes identified in collaboration with research participants about the things that they think are most important for their happiness. It would, however, be over-simplifying everything that young volunteers said about these themes to suggest that there are eleven distinct and separate things that make young volunteers happy. Young volunteers suggest that there are multiple connections between all eleven of these themes and that these interconnections can be positive (they support each other to make the person happy) or negative (they pull against each other resulting in tension). Except in workshops or interviews where I specifically asked them to abstract these themes and consider them distinctly from each other, young volunteers rarely talked about any of these themes in isolation. The themes interlink with each other, where they complement each other and come together to support the young volunteers to be happy and where they push and pull against each other causing challenges and often requiring difficult decisions to be made.

In the two feedback workshops that I ran with PVG and DC&YDC I facilitated an exercise to explore these links. Young volunteers sat in a circle and each had a card with one theme

written on it. Since ‘having a warm family’ was the most prevalent theme, the volunteer with that card started and, holding the end of a ball of string, threw the ball to any other volunteer. They then had to describe the link between their card and the card held by the volunteer that they had thrown the string to. I anticipated that the activity would continue until the participants ran out of links, but in reality both groups continued for more than twenty minutes and there was no sign of them running out of connections between different themes. At the end of each exercise we were left with a physical representation of a complex and uneven web of connections, desires, values and priorities.

This exercise illustrated that there are multiple potential ways in which each of the themes can support and conflict with each of the other themes. These links also make reference to the conceptual models of happiness identified in Chapter Four. Where two themes support each other they are generally either relating to the same conceptual model or to the overlap between two of the models as discussed on page 155. For example having money to use and having a high education were generally themes considered to support each other since if a volunteer has money to use then she/he can pay for a high education and research participants assumed that if they are successful in gaining a high enough education in the future then they will be able to make money and both of these things will enable them to ‘Become Happy’. On the other hand, if a young volunteer does not have the money that she/he needs to use to get a high education then the assumption is that it will be more difficult for them to ‘Become Happy’ in the future.

Where there is tension between two themes, this generally refers to tension between two conceptual models of happiness that are being prioritised. One of the clearest and most commonly expressed examples of such a potential clash between conceptual models is the tension between family and education that is also a tension between ‘happy being with others’ and ‘becoming happy’. Family is closely related to all of past, present and future, but spending time and sharing space with family in the present is incredibly important for young volunteer’s happiness. Simultaneously, young volunteers believe that getting a high education is one of the things that is most important for their future happiness and yet

getting a high education can take young volunteers away from their family since their family may live in a rural area with limited access to high schools and particularly universities.

One specific group of young volunteers who had moved away from their family to further their education were young novice monks, but this also applied to other young people whose families lived in rural provinces of Laos. Young volunteers in this situation told how they miss their families very much and this can cause suffering in the present. These young volunteers also expressed a higher pressure to do well in their education than that expressed by young volunteers who lived with their families, although it was often unclear whether this pressure originated from themselves or from their families. This stress and pressure to do well also caused suffering in the present and highlights the prioritisation of future happiness over present happiness with the people that they most loved.

In addition, opinions about education are not always shared between families and young volunteers. Most young volunteers perceived that their families were supportive of their desire to get a high education, but a few young volunteers told how their family either felt that they should be earning money in the present rather or disagreed with their choice of subject of study. While the majority of young volunteers who were at university said that their family let them choose what subject they studied, those whose families had expressed a desire for them to study a particular subject did not feel that they could disagree or challenge this. Two young volunteers told how they had decided to study for two different degrees so that they could study both the subject that they wanted and the subject that their parents preferred.

Conclusion

The eleven themes about the things most important for young volunteers' happiness, as described in this chapter, were identified through a collaborative process with research participants. These themes illustrate the content of happiness for young Lao volunteers.

While each theme potentially fits within each of the conceptual models identified in Chapter Four, as I analysed the reasons why each of these themes was important it became apparent that the majority of the themes, as they were explained by research participants, emphasised one particular conceptual model. The three conceptual models are used, therefore, as an organising structure for examining the themes.

Young volunteers rarely, however, talk about the themes in isolation from each other and, therefore I argue that it is important to look at the ways that the themes support each other or pull against each other to create tension. These connections between the themes also have the potential to join together with beliefs held about happiness into more complex normative narratives about the ways that young volunteers should act in order to be or become happy. Such ‘happiness scripts’ are socially constructed in response to the multiple influences in research participants lives and in the following chapter I explore the three most common scripts which young Lao volunteers follow.

Chapter Six: Three happiness scripts that young volunteers share

Introduction

The previous chapter's thematic analysis of the things that young volunteers say make them happy provides us with the individual threads of happiness as identified in collaboration between me, the researcher, and the young volunteers who were the primary subjects of the research. But, as already indicated, these threads rarely exist in isolation. Research participants have different beliefs about the importance of these themes and their beliefs interweave with each other into complex patterns of thinking about happiness. The potential number of these interweavings is infinite, and yet I was struck by how frequently a small number of particular 'scripts' representing distinct combinations of beliefs about these themes, emerged from my close reading of the data.

This chapter identifies and explores three happiness scripts which are:

- Happiness script one: The way to be happy is to be a good Lao person
- Happiness script two: I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life
- Happiness script three: I am happy when I follow my heart

Happiness Scripts

This chapter draws heavily upon Script Theory, discussed on page 40, that suggests that groups of people from different cultures have constructed different cultural scripts that explain their expectations and beliefs about emotional experience.

Through a close ethnographic reading focusing on the ways in which the above themes connect, resist and combine, three common shared scripts about happiness clearly emerged from the current data. These scripts were each underpinned by a set of shared beliefs that research participants express about happiness and were identified by the ways in which young volunteers weave these beliefs into shared normative stories about happiness. In this research, when talking about ‘happiness scripts’ I do not refer to explicit and fully formed narratives expressed by any individual young volunteer, but to sets of common and repeated fragmented glimpses that reflect a particular shared story that young volunteers subscribe to about happiness. I do not, therefore, suggest that any of these scripts fully represent any particular young volunteer’s experience or understanding and neither do I suggest that these scripts are not connected, since on occasion they both pull against each other and bleed into each other. However, the scripts do illustrate ways that the young volunteers use to, either consciously or unconsciously, organise and make sense of their experiences and ideas about happiness. Any individual can and often does simultaneously hold several different, potentially contradictory, scripts about happiness, and examples of this and the challenges that it can bring are discussed below (see page 229).

Combining the conceptual models that focus on the form of happiness and the themes that focus on the content of happiness, these scripts also introduce a new normative aspect to the ways that research participants perceive happiness. Each script emphasises specific themes from the previous chapter and a particular set of beliefs about these themes. All three scripts include elements of past, present and future happiness but, as discussed below, script one predominantly reaches back to the past, script two predominantly looks forward to the future and script three is predominantly located in the present. Similarly, all three scripts refer to different types of knowledge about happiness but the knowledge underpinning scripts one and two predominantly originate outside of the individual (for example, with other people, political and religious systems and the media) while the knowledge underpinning script three predominantly originates inside the individual. While the three scripts do not map neatly to the three conceptual models of happiness identified in Chapter Four, each aligns more closely with one of the models and these relationships are explored

later in the chapter. The three happiness scripts, therefore, offer an alternative way to organise the data and to represent the most common of the multiple ways that the young volunteers involved in this research talk about the things that make them (or will make them) happy and the beliefs that they hold about happiness.

In the description and discussion of the three scripts below, composite vignettes are used to illustrate the ways that these scripts are visible in the lives of the research participants. Composite vignettes are used primarily to avoid compromising the individual confidentiality of young volunteers by sharing such detailed accounts of their circumstances, but also to reflect that the scripts themselves are shared and that, while any individual may tend towards one or other of the scripts, no research participants exclusively followed only one script. Names used for the characters in the scripts VIG1, VIG2, VIG3 and VIG4 in order to emphasise that they are composite characters and to distinguish them from the pseudonyms used for actual individual volunteers.

Happiness Script 1: “The way to be happy is to be a good Lao person.”

The link between ‘happiness’ and ‘virtue’ has occupied philosophers across different cultures for many centuries (see, for example, Engstrom & Whiting, 1996). Similarly, this first happiness script emerged from a link that the research participants frequently made between being happy and doing the right thing. As discussed on page 161, “doing the right thing” was initially considered as a theme related to the things that young people say make them happy, but after further discussion it became apparent that young people were actually talking about a particular script about what “the right thing” is. All of the research participants who made this link between happiness and doing the right thing connected doing the right thing to a clear sense of national identity and pride in being Lao, expressing the belief that if they conform to a particular story about what it means to be a good Lao person then they will be happy.

This is a script that is informed by the Lao political, religious and social context. For research participants it was strongly grounded in the importance of family and community in Lao society; the individual is ascribed a social role which s/he must adhere to and they have certain duties with respect to their family and community that they must fulfil if they want to lead a happy life. This role is different for women and men since women's role will generally have more emphasis upon looking after children, but the focus of both roles is, first, family and, second, community.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the idea of a traditional Lao culture is problematic for many reasons including those related to diverse geography, a complex political history and multiple indigenous ethnicities and religions.⁴⁶ Different stories about what it means to be Lao and about the nature of Lao people have been told and retold to support different political agendas and the current political regime has used this story-telling to their advantage, strongly promoting a script about what it means to be a good Lao person which weaves together elements of socialism and Buddhism with ideas about the nature of traditional Lao culture (Evans, 1998). This script is normative - it tells people how they ought to behave, and it does so with reference to the collective benefits available for Lao society if individuals follow this code of behaviour in order to fulfil their traditional roles and duties in the family and Lao society.

The complex and historic relationship between political rhetoric and Buddhist teaching (*dharma*) is particularly interesting here⁴⁷. The politicization of the Buddhist *Sangha* (monastic community) started well before the emergence of the current regime and Stuart-Fox points out that, particularly in the years after World War Two, “the Sangha became a

⁴⁶ Because of the location of the research, almost all of the research participants (44 out of 46 interviewees) self-identified as belonging to the majority Lao ethnic group, as being Buddhist and all live in or very near to Vientiane Capital City, although some grew up in other provinces. As with all three happiness scripts identified in this chapter, this script only applies to research participants in the current research and it is possible that this script would not apply or would take a different form outside of the majority ethnic group.

⁴⁷ For more information about this fascinating topic see Stuart-Fox's 1996 book “Buddhist Kingdom, Marxist State: The Making of Modern Laos”.

target for political manipulation by both sides” (1996:123). Evans (1998) and Stuart-Fox (1996) outline a relationship between the Pathet Lao (and subsequently the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party) and the Buddhist *Sangha* which has been characterised by ambivalence and disjuncture, and yet which seems to have settled into mutual acceptance and common ground. Having courted the support of the Sangha during the years before 1975, immediately after seizing power the PL attempted to utilise both the particular position and respect that monks have within Lao communities and also to ban monks from teaching about topics central to the *dharma* (such as heaven and hell, *karma* and merit) that the new government thought to be superstitious, resulting in many members of the Sangha leaving the country (Stuart-Fox date 1996:135). However, during the 1980s the Lao leadership, perhaps realising that they were fighting a losing battle in terms of the importance that Buddhism continued to hold in many Lao people’s lives, relaxed their attitude towards Buddhist practice and doctrine (Evans 1998). Evans further suggests that the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and 1990s forced the Lao leadership to reassess their relationship with Buddhism, and that “the regime has turned increasingly to Buddhism in its search of new ideologies of legitimation and of a reformulated Lao nationalism” (1998:67). Similarly, Pholsena and Banonyong suggest that, despite their early attempts to instil a new, rational, morality and identity into the Lao psyche, the Lao leadership quickly sought strategically to re-embrace Buddhist teachings and to redefine the link between Buddhism and the Lao national identity to their own advantage (2007:160).

In 1995 the Venerable Khamtan Thepbouali, who held positions both in the *Sangha* and government, said that “Buddhism is inseparable from the Lao nation” (Evans 1998: 66). Pholsena and Banomyong (2007) write that Buddhist monks were subject to compulsory political seminars, emphasising this point that the two ideological systems of Marxism and Buddhism “followed the same fundamental aim – seeking well-being through the elimination of suffering” (p. 161). It seems that the LPRP have attempted to use the Buddhist *Sangha* in the same way as Stuart-Fox suggests that, prior to World War Two, the

same *Sangha* was used by the French colonial regime to provide “ritual reinforcement of the *status quo*” (1996:123).

In an attempt to demonstrate the shared goals of Buddhism and socialism, the RLRP used the language of happiness to argue:

the compatibility of socialism and Buddhism on the grounds that both aimed at putting an end to suffering (*dukkha*). The essence of the Buddha’s teaching was the attainment of freedom from suffering and the attainment of true happiness(*sukha*), while ‘the supreme goal of the revolution is to liberate the nation, to liberate the people so that they can be free of suffering, and to make all men happy’ (Stuart-Fox 1996: 136)

The key message is that the common aim of both Buddhism and communism is happiness achieved through freedom from suffering. As Stuart-Fox points out however, despite such a shared focus upon the elimination of suffering, the RLRP and the Buddhist *Sangha* present paths to happiness that appear to be in fundamental conflict. He describes how the PL, and subsequently the RLRP, believed that “the only merit that mattered was to be gained through working with the new government for the material well-being of all” (1996: 135) whereas in Buddhist dharma “true happiness lies in turning inward to the discovery of the mind and a deepening conscious self-awareness” (1996:137).

It is likely that this emphasis upon a moral code that promotes collective happiness originates prior to the current political regime, but it has clearly been used by the current government to further their own political project. One way in which this has been taught is through the content of the educational curriculum and the culture of schools. Collective values with the concomitant striving for harmony and ‘face saving’ are also embedded in the school curriculum which emphasises the development of a correct political and social attitude with ‘correct social attitude’ meaning that ‘students should demonstrate a spirit of mutual assistance and cooperation instead of competitiveness, which is regarded as selfish and individualistic’ (Ng 1991:167). Evans cites a story in a primary school primer from the 1980s that stated about Lao people:

Above all, they must struggle against individualistic thinking,...to build new socialist people whose hearts are clean and pure. (cited in Evans, 1998:160)

This script is underpinned by three beliefs that research participants expressed about happiness:

- Other people know better than me what will make me happy.
- If I conform to the social norms and follow the moral rules that have been taught to me then I will be happy.
- The individual must play his/her part in promoting collective happiness; the group being happy will make the individual happy.

Happiness script one primarily looks back to the (real or imagined) traditional past in order to identify what will make young volunteers happy. It locates knowledge about happiness in social norms and obligations; young people are provided with a normative view of what they must do in order to be happy.

While all the happiness scripts refer to all of the themes outlined in Chapter Five, happiness script one places particular importance upon:

- Having a warm family
- Being able to help other people and society

Vignette 1: The way to be happy is to be a good Lao person.

In an interview Alee , an 18 year old young volunteer, is talking about a common ritual that takes place at Lao religious festivals where children express their love and respect for their parents and the elders in their family. She tells me:

Since I was young until now I wanted to tell my parents that I loved them, but I couldn't because I was so shy.

Her friend, VIG1, a 19 year old female volunteer who is also being interviewed encourages Alee, saying:

It is what Lao young people must do because our parents gave us life and we must give back to them. It will give them happiness and it will give you happiness.

She continues, linking this duty to Buddhism:

Buddhism has been the religion for Lao people since our ancestors – we have practiced it for a long time. Buddhism teaches us how to be a good person, it has a lot of lessons, it teaches us not to do bad things, not to hurt other people but to make them happy. It's like another law for us.

A short time after the interview, VIG1 tells me unexpectedly that tomorrow will be her last day of volunteering at the NPA where she has been an active and regular volunteer. She has recently expressed how happy it makes her to be a volunteer and I am surprised by her news. She says that, as she gets closer to her graduation, her parents have told her that she has to concentrate on her studies; she will miss being a volunteer but she trusts her parents and knows that they want her to be happy. She says that, even though she is sad to leave, she is sure that she will be happier if she does what her parents tell her to do.

A few months later, VIG1 phones me to invite me to visit her home and I accept. As we chat I ask her what her plan is for the future and immediately she tells me that she will work for 2 or 3 years after she graduates and then she will marry her boyfriend and have 2 or 3 children. I ask if she will go back to work after she has children and she said yes, after 3 months. She says that if she follows this plan, like all Lao women, she will be happy.

I try to ask whether this is what she wants to do or what she feels she ought to do...but VIG1 looks confused and says that she doesn't understand the difference. Her English language is good and we attempt this conversation in both English and Lao but I cannot explain my question. She changes the subject and we go to pick some vegetables to cook for dinner.

While research participants value many different relationships, it is clear that the people who almost all young volunteers consider to be the most important and to whom they feel the most responsibility is their family and specifically their parents. I was repeatedly told

by young volunteers that family is very important in Lao culture and that children have a duty to obey and take care of their family. In the vignette above VIG1 tells her friend Alee that telling her parents that she loves them will give both her parents and Alee herself happiness. However, the resulting happiness is only indirectly the reason VIG1 gives that Alee should overcome her shyness and tell her parents that she loves them, Alee should do it because she has a responsibility to do so because “our parents gave us life and we must give back to them”. VIG1 says that Alee fulfilling her duty to her family will make her happy (interview: Alee).

When asked why their family were important to their happiness, several volunteers referred to the idea that a child owes their life to their family and that the child therefore has a responsibility to take care of their family and to make them happy. Others referred to reciprocal roles within the family where their family’s care is important for their happiness and, in turn, they have a responsibility to take care of their family and particularly their parents.

The thing that is most important for my happiness is having parents who encourage me. Parents are the main pillar for the family and they are the people who give us birth and help us with everything, even if the children are bad, our parents don’t say that we are other people’s children, they always said we are their children and therefore in my life my parents will always be loved by me.
(interview: Paw)

For this young volunteer the debt that they owe their parents is multi-faceted. Their parents created them, support them and are present for them.

The debt owed to parents translates into practice variously as a duty to support their parents in their old age and to acquiesce to their parents’ will and demands. Research participants expressed different ways to support their parents and these are examined to different degrees in each of the three happiness scripts identified in this chapter. In relation to “the way to be happy is to be a good Lao person” the support that participants should provide to their parents involves staying in close proximity to them and personally taking care of them.

Family is the most important thing for my happiness and so it is a child's responsibility is to take care of their parents and be with them until they are old. (workshop: PVG)

When I first arrived in Laos to do my fieldwork I was repeatedly told, by both Lao people and foreign researchers, that the biggest difficulty I would face when asking young Lao people questions was that they would tell me what they thought that I wanted to hear. As I asked questions about happiness and heard answers that seemed to me more about duty and obedience I started wondering if the research participants were indeed telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. Based upon my own cultural assumptions that fulfilling duty is not necessarily related to happiness, I often challenged these statements but was repeatedly told, often accompanied by some confusion about the question, that doing their duty to their family and their society made them happy.

Several young volunteers explained the importance of family for their happiness in terms of their parents role to teach and/or guide them to become good people.

Family is the most important for my happiness because my family is my inspiration to make me be a good person in society. (Interview: Pu)

For this young volunteer there is a link between being a good person in society and being a happy person.

One of the key ways that research participants perceived that parents teach their children to be good people is by passing on the Buddhist religion. It has been suggested that the practices of Buddhism can sometimes appear more important to people who identify as Theravadan Buddhist than any detailed understanding of the *Dharma* (Watts 2009). Watts (2009) suggests a perceived connection between practice and future rebirth that he calls "ritual action to gain heaven" and which he views as representing a view of *karma* and *merit* that reflects pre-Buddhist thought related to Brahmanism (2009:15). All of the research participants that identified as Buddhist participate in Buddhist practices such as giving alms at least on Buddhist festivals and holy days and when I attended such occasions with them they found it difficult to articulate why they participate in such practices,

resorting to answers such as “this is Lao tradition, it is what all Lao people do” (workshop: DC&YDC). However, my observations and interactions with young volunteers suggest that such statements point to a subtler understanding of Lao young people’s relationship with Buddhism than a misunderstanding, a lack of understanding or an over-simplification of the *Dharma*. With only two tentative exceptions⁴⁸, all of the (44) young volunteers who identified in interviews as Buddhist said that Buddhism was important in their lives. By far the most common response to why Buddhism was important linked Buddhism to young volunteers’ sense of their identity as a Lao young person in a specific Lao family that has been Buddhist for many generations.

For almost all Lao people our religion is Buddhism, we cannot explain why, we believe because in the past all the people, all the grandparents, they believe that. (interview: Loun)

It seems that Buddhism ties together young people’s family identity and their Lao identity.

The practice of Buddhism in Laos and its relationship with the political regime are further complicated by the inclusion of important aspects that are generally considered Buddhist but have no connection to the *Dharma* and instead reach back to pre-Buddhist animist beliefs. Another name for the *baci* ceremony is a *sou khuan* ceremony which literally means “inviting the soul” and its focus is to call all 32 parts of the soul back to the individual or individuals at the centre of the ceremony. Ngaosyvathn (1990) suggests that the *baci* ceremony restores the psychological equilibrium of the individual by re-establishing the integrity of their flighty souls and reaffirms the solidarity of the community through the shared ritual. I took part in *baci* ceremonies many times during my fieldwork and was repeatedly told by research participants that they are a Buddhist ceremony that is an important part of Lao tradition. As part of the ceremony cotton strings are tied around

⁴⁸ One young volunteer said that Buddhism was not so important in her life but that she was glad that she had been born Buddhist rather than another less peace-loving religion. Another said that Buddhism was neither important nor unimportant in his life.

the wrist of the person who is the subject of the ceremony (e.g. the married couple, the person who is about to go on a journey, or the person whose new house is being blessed) and also other participants and blessings are offered including frequently the wish that they will have happiness in their life. In an informal conversation one research participant told me “Lao people are happy to come together and celebrate a baci ceremony, it brings us all together and reminds us that we are Lao and that we are Buddhist”.

Although Buddhism is considered by some researchers to be an individualist religion (Piker 1968:781) and, above, Stuart Fox (1996) suggests a distinction between individual Buddhist and collective socialist conceptions of happiness, the current research shows that young volunteers perceive a link between Buddhist values and the idea of collective happiness. In an interview, I asked one young volunteer, who was a member of the Sangha, what the *Dharma* (Buddhist teachings) says about happiness and he told me:

The dharma does not say that happiness is when you get whatever you want... this isn't real happiness. Real happiness is when we see the people, all the people are happy. (interview: Tik)

Research participants also made a link between being a good person in society and the possibility of collective happiness. Such a collective happiness was expressed by some participants in terms of their family (if my family are happy then I will be happy) and by others in terms of their society. When asked in an activity in a research workshop to describe what happiness means for her, one young volunteer said:

Happiness is having good emotions and actions towards the people you love and society. My happiness is the things that help friends and society to have happiness and this will not make me sad.
(workshop: DC&YDC)

This volunteer suggests that if the people that she loves and her society are happy then she will be happy. These definitions of happiness were displayed and young volunteers were asked to comment on each other's ideas. One volunteer commented on this definition “Yes! This is happiness that is perfect happy.”

In this happiness script, collective happiness and harmony is considered to be more important than the individual's happiness. In the current research this sense of individual

responsibility for collective happiness was often expressed using the word *sa-ma-kii* (generally translated as “solidarity”). Participants identified positive relationships as vitally important for their happiness and, when I explored in research workshops what they considered to be the characteristics and components of positive relationships, the word *sa-ma-kii* was used far more frequently than any other word. Other researchers have explored and problematised the frequent use of the term *sa-ma-kii* in Lao communities, suggesting that the rhetoric does not always match with the reality (see, for example, High, 2006). The English translation of *sa-ma-kii* (solidarity) has strong links to socialist political discourses (see, for example, Ost, 2005) and although *sa-ma-kii* is not a new term in Lao language it is a word that has been strongly appropriated by the current political regime in its promotion of the “new Socialist man” or ideal Lao citizen (High, 2006).

One Saturday morning I was facilitating a group activity with 23 young volunteers at Dongsavat Children and Youth Development Centre where we were looking at what it meant to them for a family to be warm and for friends to be good. In small groups we had ‘brain-stormed’ answers to the questions and, in different small groups, I had asked them if they could find a consensus about which of the three answers that they thought were most important. I noticed that a heated discussion was occurring in one of the groups and went to listen and quickly became aware that the disagreement was not about which answers were most important but was about what could be included in the word *sa-ma-kii*. Every time that a particular answer was suggested by members of the group others would say “that is the same as *sa-ma-kii*”. I had asked them to come up with the three most important answers and they tried hard to do so but in the end one of the group looked at me, sighed, and said “there is only one thing that is important for good friends...*sa-ma-kii*”. When we came to feedback in the larger group other groups all included *sa-ma-kii* as one of the most important answers for both warm families and good friends and there was ongoing discussion about how widely *sa-ma-kii* could be defined. It seemed that for many of the young volunteers *sa-ma-kii* is a cover-all term for all that is positive in relationships, with some emphasis on mutual help and support and is related to several of the identified themes that young volunteers say make them happy including, most explicitly, ‘having a warm

family’ and ‘having good friends’ but also ‘having a role as a volunteer’ and ‘being able to help others’. The importance of the phrase was, therefore wider reaching than simply to relationships with family and friends. Young volunteers believed that it was important to extend *sa-ma-kii* to their immediate communities and to the wider society. Although research participants did not say so explicitly, the importance that they place upon collective happiness and the vital importance of *sa-ma-kii* for positive relationships that are necessary for happiness suggests a belief that a group of people that have *sa-ma-kii* are also likely to have collective happiness.

Happiness Script 2: “I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life.”

While the script saying that happiness is being a good Lao person tends to look backwards to a re-imagined traditional Laos (see, for examples Evans, 1998), the country is also looking and moving forwards into the modern world. As discussed in Chapter Two, in the recent past it has been suggested that this modernisation has happened in Laos more slowly than in other countries in the ASEAN region (Jerndal and Rigg 1998; Rehbein 2005) but in the last 5 years commentaries suggest that the rate of change in Laos, or at least Vientiane, has rapidly picked up speed (Asian Trends Monitoring, 2013).

MSc. research conducted by Sisaleumsak in 2012⁴⁹ into Lao female garment factory worker’s perceptions of modernity finds that the women’s ideas about modernity fit into two categories; modernity as consumption and modernity as *saduak sabai*. Sisaleumsak says of the term *saduak sabai* that:

⁴⁹ This research is unpublished but but which can be seen online by members of the google group “LaoFAB” at: <http://www.LaoFAB.org/document/view/2283> (Accessed 11th July 2014)
For more information, or to join LAOFAB go to: <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/LaoFAB>.
(Accessed: 11th July 2014)

...this is a term which has no simple and ready translation in either English or Lao. *Saduak sabai* can be used many different ways in Lao language to mean such things as easygoing, good facilities or even being happy. (Sisaleumsak, 2012: 68)

Finally she comes to a working definition of *saduak sabai* as “a set of values that includes ease, comfort, contentment and freedom” (Sisaleumsak, 2012:68). However, while Sisaleumsak (2012) suggests that consumption and *saduak sabai* are two distinct sets of understanding about modernity, young volunteers in this research talked about consumption in terms of the ability to purchase a life that is *saduak sabai*. Furthermore, young volunteers associated a life that is *saduak sabai* with a happy life.

I did not ask young volunteers directly about modernity, but the phrase *saduak sabai* was frequently used by young people and is central to the second of the three happiness scripts identified here. The word *sabai* on its own, however, is a Lao word in very common usage, which does not necessarily have this connotation. However, when young volunteers used the word *sabai* in conjunction with the word *saduak* (generally translated as “convenient”) to create the phrase “*saduak sabai*” the emphasis shifts subtly. Although still related to a feeling of comfort, slightly differently to Sisaleumsak’s (2012) set of values, young volunteers used this phrase to refer to a belief that a comfortable, convenient and easy life will come about when they have all of the external things that they perceive that they (and in many cases their families and friends) need. And in order to get these external goods they need to have money to buy them. The phrase *saduak sabai* was therefore commonly used by young people talking about happiness, with particular reference to the sort of life that they wanted to have in the future and the sorts of external things that would provide them with such a life.

Therefore the three core beliefs about happiness underpinning this script are:

- A happy life is one which is *saduak sabai*.
- The things that will make life *saduak sabai* are external to the individual.

- The things that make life *saduak sabai* could be purchased if the individual had enough money.

Happiness script two is primarily future focused upon the ways that participants believe that they can become happy, inspired by modernisation and ways of life that are new to Laos. Young volunteers are looking outside of themselves for the knowledge of how to become happy, comparing themselves with people around them and, via media and advertising, people in other countries around the world. This script therefore utilises the concept of ‘becoming happy’ with an emphasis on an external route of acquiring objects in order to reach the end point of happiness.

While all the happiness scripts refer to all of the themes outlined in Chapter Five, happiness script two places particular importance upon:

- Having money to use well
- Being able to do the things that I want to do
- Having a high education
- Being able to help other people and society

Vignette 2: I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life.

VIG2 is a young man aged 19 who volunteers with one NPA, works and studies business every evening. It is sometimes difficult to manage the demands of all these different roles and VIG2 is often running late and seems a little stressed. He laughingly says that the thing that would make him most happy right now would be to sleep until late in the morning, but he is not hopeful that this will be a possibility any time soon!

Despite his busy schedule VIG2 is very sociable and he often drinks beer with his many friends in the bars in Vientiane. Although he obviously enjoys this aspect of his life he says that he also often feels pressure to go out drinking and that if he didn't go he would offend his friends. Looking exhausted he adds that if he doesn't go out drinking when they ask then his friends might stop inviting him.

VIG2 prides himself on wearing the latest fashions and having the latest gadgets. VIG2 asked his parents for an iPhone for his birthday but they couldn't give him the full amount so he carefully saved the remaining money from his salary. He does not have the latest model but says that it is better to have an old model than a phone that is not an iPhone because an iPhone is what everyone wants to have.

He often compares himself to other people saying, for example, "I have everything that other people have, I have a house, a motorbike, everything, but now I have a small house, I will be happier when I have more money and can have a bigger house, now I have a motorbike but I don't have a car like other people."

Over the period of time that I know him he expresses different opinions about money. In one conversation he says that he thinks that it is more important to be happy than rich because he knows that it is possible to be rich and unhappy, but his most consistent, if slightly apologetic, opinion is that the most important thing for his happiness is money. VIG2 says that he "cannot live without [money] because money can buy all things. If I don't have money I don't have food, I can't go anywhere, I can't do anything. Money is not happiness but money will make me and other people and my family happy."

VIG2's dream for the future feels so big that he is at first reluctant to share it:

VIG2: I want to have more money to buy the thing that can make my family happy and comfortable (saduak sabai)

Christina: What is what you need to buy to make your family happy and comfortable?

VIG2: It's a big one...(he laughs)...a new house.

VIG2 believes that the best way to help his family is by making money in order to buy them the things that he thinks will make them comfortable. This can be used to illustrate how the happiness scripts weave together the twelve key themes identified in Chapter Five related to the things that young volunteers say make them happy. VIG2 cares deeply about his family (theme: having a warm family) and has identified that the way that he can help them (theme: being able to help other people) is by being able to buy (theme: having

money) the things that he believes will make his family's life easier (theme: being able to do the things I like). He is studying hard (theme: having a high education) in order to achieve this dream (theme: being able to follow my dreams) of building a new house for his family.

This particular interweaving of the themes – and the belief that being able to provide financially for family is the best way to help them - is common across young volunteer's stories. Another example, Noy (male, 22) talked repeatedly in conversations about the difficult decision to leave his elderly mother alone in her rural home and come to Vientiane to get an education and hopefully find a good job in the future. Noy had faced a decision; he could either stay at home and help his mother on her farm, or he could move to Vientiane. He missed her very much and knew that she missed him, but he had decided that the best way that he could help her was by building a future for himself that included making money so that he could buy her the things that she needed to make her life happy and comfortable.

The question of what a person “needs” in order to make their life comfortable is, however, not always straightforward. VIG2 and Noy each dream of making enough money to buy his family a new house. Noy describes his mother as living alone in her small basic house in a rural village but, despite repeated questions, it was not possible for me to get a clear sense of how a bigger house would make her life easier or more comfortable. Noy has made it clear in other conversations that he is impressed by life in Vientiane and considers it to be more advanced than life in the countryside. VIG2's family all live together in a 2-level concrete house just outside of the centre of the city and his comments suggest that his desire to build a bigger house for his family includes an element of comparing himself and his family to other people.

One of the things that many young volunteers believe will make their life *saduak sabai* is approval from others and/or to be perceived to have a higher status in the eyes of society. Although status and approval cannot be purchased directly, many of the young volunteers believe that there are things that they can purchase for themselves and/or their family which

will either impress others or make others like them more. While a new house may practically and directly provide an increased level of physical comfort, through extra space or improved facilities, its perceived value was more commonly expressed by research participants in terms of the increased status that it would bring for the family. Sisaleumsak also identifies this link in her work, saying:

The desire to earn money can also be seen as an outcome of materialism resulting from modernism and development and the desire to improve the status of the parents in the eyes of the community.

(2012:3)

In the current research, a new house was the most commonly expressed example of research participants' desire to improve their family's status. These stories corroborate evidence from an unpublished research report written in 2011 by Gender Development Group (now Gender Develop Association after successfully completing NPA registration) looking at women's experiences of migration which shows that one of the motivating factors for many female migrants was a dream of making enough money to build a new house for their family in their home village. Women interviewed believed that being able to build a new modern home for their family would both help the family and demonstrate their own transformation into a successful and modern woman.

However, this building of new houses was not purely a dream for the future. New houses (along with new commercial premises) are currently being rapidly built all over Vientiane and it was less common for me to visit a young volunteer in a house that was not undergoing some level of construction work. On many occasions these young volunteers and their families proudly showed me around their half-constructed new abodes, and expressed the belief that a new house is a visible demonstration to other people of wealth and of modernity, a symbol of status or of relative position within the village. Less commonly, similar views were also expressed about other material belongings such as new vehicles. Several participants expressed the view that buying a car for their family would make life more *saduak sabai* and it was clear from my conversations with young volunteers

that, while there are undoubtedly also practical advantages to owning a car, families that owned a car were considered as of a higher status than those who only owned motorbikes.

As discussed on page 59, despite perceptions that Laos is changing more slowly than its neighbouring countries there is evidence that the speed of change, particularly in urban areas, is increasing (Askew et al. 2006; Thaleman 2007). As their lives change, it is likely that Lao young people's perception of the things that they need in order to make their life comfortable will change. The current research suggests that these perceptions are also affected by the research participants' comparisons with people around them and the perceived status that certain belongings and behaviours confer.

This happiness script tells a story that the things will make life *saduak sabai*, and therefore happy, are external to the individual and that, if the individual has sufficient financial resources, these things can be acquired. This script therefore emphasises one specific perceived route to Becoming Happy which is acquiring possessions and status.

Happiness Script 3: "I am happy when I follow my heart"

Happiness script three locates the ability to know and control happiness within the individual. Since happiness could be thought of as a contagious disease that young volunteers want to spread (see page 147) and helping other people was important for young volunteers' happiness then this happiness script suggests that they have a responsibility to make themselves happy in order to make other people happy. When following this script the way to make each individual happy is to know what is most important within their own hearts and to follow this path.

One possible origin for this happiness script is the theory of education for sustainable development promoted by PADETC⁵⁰ and in particular by PADETC's founder Sombath Somphone. PADETC holds a unique and influential position in Lao civil society and specifically in the field of youth volunteerism. PADETC promotes a model of sustainable development where four balanced pillars of development (the environment, culture, heart and mind, and the economy) support a 'roof' (or ultimate goal) of "Genuine National Happiness, a concept of joyful living inspired by the Bhutanese idea of Gross National Happiness" (PADETC 2008:4). The 'foundations' of this model of sustainable development are good governance and education, which will provide the people who are able to govern well and in such a way that leads to Genuine National Happiness. PADETC considers that the pillar that has most been neglected is the pillar of 'heart and mind' and this is where they place much of their focus, coining the phrase that "the heart of education is education of the heart". A few of the research participants in this study are or have been volunteers with PADETC and the founders of both of the NPAs in which most of the research participants volunteered had been volunteers with PADETC, and these ideas were reflected in many conversations that I had with research participants.

However the ideas that the search for happiness is one of self-discovery and that happiness is to be found inside the individual's heart and/or mind is not confined in Laos to this very specific group of young people. Reaching back to a past before the Buddhist Dharma was appropriated for political ends, this script draws on Buddhist spiritual values such as awareness of mind, compassion and mindfulness. Following Young's theory of modernity, this script also reaches forward, past high modernity's "brute comfort and material success"

⁵⁰ "PADETC, the acronym of Participatory Development Training Centre in English has been purposefully chosen to sound like the Lao term Pa-Dec which means fermented fish. Pa-Dec has a very distinctive flavour and is ubiquitously found in every Lao kitchen and universally used in everyday Lao cooking. Just as Pa-Dec is uniquely Lao and an indispensable ingredient in Lao food, PADETC, too, as an indigenous all-Lao organization rooted in Lao culture and society, is committed to make a unique and distinctive contribution to the development of Laos." (PADETC 2008:35)

to late modernity with its focus on “self-discovery and expression, it is not so much arrival as becoming and self-fulfilment, not of hard work rewarded, but of spontaneity and expressivity anew” (2007:2). Research participants reflected this script in comments relating to Buddhism but also in comments related to secular inspirational quotations that they have read on social media, to song lyrics and to motivational talks and seminars that they had attended.

The key beliefs underpinning this script are:

- Happiness comes from what I feel inside rather than what I have outside.
- The best way for me to help other people is to do the things that make my heart happy.
- The first steps to happiness are self-awareness and mindfulness.

Happiness script three emphasises being happy in the present with a focus upon the young volunteer’s feelings now, although this does not preclude dreams for the future. The knowledge about happiness inherent in this script is located inside the individual young volunteer. Therefore, this script is different from the previous two scripts in that it is inherently multiple, since following their heart will mean different things to different people. In order to respect this characteristic, I offer two short vignettes to illustrate the third happiness script.

While all the happiness scripts refer to all of the themes outlined in Chapter Five, happiness script one places particular importance upon:

- Being able to do the things that I want to do
- Being able to follow my dreams
- Being *jai yen*
- Being together and going places together

Vignette 3: I am happy when I follow my heart

VIG3 is a 21 year old man and talented musician who started volunteering about six years ago when he was a high school student. When he became a volunteer he discovered that he had a talent for teaching music and started leading activities.

Before he was a volunteer VIG3 didn't know what he wanted to do with his life but, with support, he realised that he wanted to use his talents to help other people. When VIG3 talks about happiness he says that he is happy to have had the opportunities that he has had. He also emphasise the importance of music to his happiness.

I always play music and sing...sometimes when I have problems and conflicts I just play the music and sing a song and after that I forget that problem and my body or my feeling is good...yeah...and it makes me feel happy when I play the music with the students and they sing and I play the music...

VIG3 repeatedly refers to a particular role model and mentor who helped him learn how to "grow up" and that "when my life was down he helped me to stand up again... stand again....keep going....many times. I'm really happy that he did that." Despite the fact that his life is not perfect he feels that he has found his own happiness in his career working for an INGO and now he, in his turn, wants to help other young people to grow up and find their happiness.

I know my own happiness and working on this project sometimes I help others and they also have happiness and I am happy to help them to be happy.

VIG3 offers the following personal definition of happiness:

Happiness means we can stay together, we can work together, we can feel together, we can share ideas together and thinking and everything we want together. I think happiness is standing with someone in heart and mind, happiness is to understand people...what they need and they want and to create their life and your life together. That is happiness I think.

Vignette 4: I am happy when I follow my heart

Whenever I ask VIG4 about happiness one of the first words that he uses is 'freedom'. He says that freedom is the most important thing for his happiness because

(If I have freedom) I can do everything that I want to or the things that I have never done before. I can think and decide on my own and no-one controls me.

VIG4 talks about the things that make him happy being ‘the things that I do from my heart’ and ‘the things that my heart wants to do’.

VIG4 has chosen a lifestyle that is quite different from the traditional or expected lifestyle for Lao young adults. He has turned down full-time jobs in favour of taking various part-time and short-term pieces of work. Some of these pay well and this allows him to do other things that he wants to do including volunteering and travelling. This is a difficult balance and sometimes he appears tired and says that he has too much work on and is stressed, but usually he says that it is a good arrangement because he works hard for short periods of time and then takes time to relax.

However, VIG4 is clear that his responsibilities to family and friends are sometimes more important than his individual dreams. VIG4 acknowledges that while his family are supportive of the choices that he makes they sometimes find his life quite difficult to understand. Although he dreams to move to another province in the future, right now he feels that his heart wants to stay with his mother in Vientiane. Similarly, one of the projects that took up a lot of VIG4’s time while I was in Vientiane was working with one of his close friends (“who I think like a brother”) to develop a business that is his dream. For VIG4, “a freedom life” means being free to do the things that his heart wants to do and many of the things that his heart wants to do are about helping other people fulfil their dreams.

As discussed on page 146, the word *jai* (‘heart’) is central to understanding how Lao people communicate about emotions. In relation to this third happiness script, research participants also used the related word *jit-jai* which was variously translated for me as heart and as mind. In multiple conversations to understand this word I learned that young volunteers used *jai* to refer to a more physical sense of ‘heart’ whereas they used *jit-jai* to refer to the mind that is central to calm self-awareness and which is accessed variously through concentration, meditation and being *jai yen*. When asked where *jit-jai* was located research participants universally indicated their physical heart and is, therefore, separate to the brain which is located in the head. Thinking is important for happiness (see, for example, the way on page 178 that research participants spoke about the importance to being *jai yen* of

thinking before action) but such thinking must be slow and controlled. Research participants often told me that thinking too much was a cause of ill-health and unhappiness; if I ever said that I had a headache the research participants would tell me that it was because I had been thinking about my research too much.

This focus on the heart and on self-awareness means that this third happiness script starts with an emphasis upon the individual. However, the individual is a starting place and the themes related to helping other people are central to this script. As one research participant commented; “we must just start from ourselves... If we want to make other people happy we have to be really happy first then we can make them happy” (interview: Tik). In contrast to the belief underpinning happiness script one that happiness comes from fitting in with culturally ascribed norms, for this happiness script having the freedom to define happiness in their own way and to do the things that they believe will make them happy were important for research participants.

Happiness is when we can be together with freedom and don't
have anyone who controls us (workshop: DC&YDC)

The clue for me to when young volunteers were following this happiness story was when they focused on how they were feeling. I came to understand that this is generally not a common focus for young Lao people and many young volunteers, at least initially, seemed confused or embarrassed by my questions about how they were feeling and reluctant to discuss their feelings. Part of this was undoubtedly related to the need to establish trust with me before they discussed things that they considered personal, but it seemed that young volunteers also found it genuinely challenging to identify and particularly to talk about either positive or negative feelings. The only big exception to this is feelings that fitted in with the first and most traditional happiness story that is discussed above and, whilst not wanting to suggest that young volunteers did not actually have these feelings, the consistency of language with which they expressed them gave me a sense that they were about conforming to a collective sense of how they should feel. In contrast, when young volunteers were telling this happiness story they examined and expressed their feelings with

enthusiasm and individuality. The young volunteers who told this happiness story often thanked me after the interviews and workshops, telling me that the questions were really interesting and had helped them to think about their lives.

This idea of self-discovery was expressed by a minority of the young volunteers but, for the few who discuss it, it is important. It was sometimes expressed as a challenge to the idea inherent in happiness script two that they need more external things in order to be happy.

One volunteer stated that:

It is important for my happiness that I understand myself. I must know that the things that I have are sufficient. (interview: Nong)

When I asked her to expand upon the idea of understanding her better, Nong said to me:

I want to know more about myself, about who I am and what my heart would like to do. Maybe sometimes I don't know what I want and so I buy things that I don't need. An example is that I might buy a new motorbike but I have an old motorbike that is fine and the new one doesn't make me any more happy. (interview: Nong)

In contrast to happiness script two, Nong observes that when she buys things to try and make herself happy it often doesn't work and that in order to know what will make her happy she needs instead to know her own mind. Another young volunteer talked similarly about the need to pay attention to herself in order to make happiness easier:

If we pay attention to our heart it is not difficult to be happy, but if we don't pay attention it is difficult to be happy. (interview; Phet)

The Lao word translated here as 'pay attention' can also be translated as 'to focus'. Nong and Phet talk about knowing their own minds but several other young volunteers framed a similar observation in terms of the need to control (or 'win') their mind and their thinking in order to make it easier be happy.

For me, it's very easy to be happy, I don't need much. Some people think 'oh if I have a big house, if I have a car I have lots of money it can make me happy'...but that is difficult...I just make myself think think ' if I teach English it can make me happy and I will make the children happy'...then it's easy to find happiness. (interview: Song)

At this point there seems to be some divergence in the story. Some young volunteers suggest that looking inside themselves enables them to realise that they already have what

they need in order to be happy, others look inside themselves and discover a drive to move forward with a particular dream. Both VIG3 and VIG4 above have dreams that they want to pursue and they have found ways to create lives where they are able to, at least most of the time, do so. VIG3, through volunteering and mentorship has found ways to integrate his existing passion and his career. VIG4 is forging a different route, searching for and finding untraditional ways to create a life that includes both financial freedom and flexible ways to use his time.

The most commonly cited way to pay attention to their heart and to control their mind in order to stay on track with reference to this script was mediation. Sam, a young male volunteer who had spent several years as a novice monk and now volunteered full time referred to the importance that Buddhist meditation held for him in calming his mind and how this was different to the understanding of Buddhism in his family with which he had grown up when he said:

Before, when I was a kid, we practiced Buddhism because it is our culture and tradition, but right now the more that I learn about Buddhism and the more that face the real problems I found that Buddhist teaching and meditation has a very very important role to make me calm down and to understand the things that happen and how is happen and to understand myself. It is a very very important role.

However, the approaches that young volunteers use to pay attention to what they really want vary and meditation was not the only technique used. Nok, a female young volunteer, talked about a seminar that she had attended in Thailand during which she spent time reflecting deeply and identifying her life goals and working out how to reach them. Nok was enthusiastic about the seminar and I was very interested to hear as this was not an experience that I had heard from other volunteers. Nok told me about this seminar over lunch in a local café and as we talked I noticed that she occasionally ‘snapped’ an elastic band that was around her wrist. When I asked her about the band she told me that it was an idea that had come from the seminar; Nok had identified that one of her goals was to lose weight and a technique that they had been taught in order to pay attention was to wear such

a band and to ‘snap’ it each time they were tempted to do something that took them away from their goal. As we ate lunch Nok snapped the band every time she wanted to eat more food as a means of keeping her on track to lose weight. Other volunteers talked in a group discussion at PVG about how they read inspirational and motivational quotations on social media (particularly Facebook) which reminded them to stay focused on their goals. These techniques are very different but all aim to focus the attention of the individual upon their ultimate goals.

Another common thread that arises from this story is having the freedom and the ability to do those things upon which their attention is focused. As for Pet, above, freedom and the feeling of not being controlled by anyone else was important for many of the young volunteers. When asked about the happiest time of his life one young volunteer told me:

When I was a child my parents didn’t give me limitations if I wanted to play. They never gave me money, but if I went to the rice paddy field they just told me “ok...this is your time”, so I could run through the fields, I could do anything, pick the bamboo in the forest, go fishing, run... even though my legs is all scarred and cut they never got angry with me so that is my best time.(interview: Sam)

Similarly, several volunteers included ideas of freedom and of not being controlled when they wrote definitions of what happiness meant for them:

My happiness is to love other people and have freedom in the things that my heart wants to do. (workshop: PVG)

Happiness is to see beautiful things and to be able to do the things that I like and be able to eat the things that I like and are delicious. (workshop: DC&YDC)

Although this script focuses more upon the individual than the previous two scripts, it still represents shared beliefs about the best way to be of help to other people. Volunteers who hold this script believe that self-awareness and identifying what it is that makes their own heart happy will lead them to happiness, and that, in turn, being happy themselves will enable them to cascade that happiness out to other people that they care about and to society more generally. This, however, reveals that there is also a normative aspect to this

script. Despite a focus upon individual uniqueness, there is some level of expectations about what the individual will find when she/he identifies what it means for them to follow their heart. They would not, for example, look inside their heart and identify that the most important thing for them is to accrue as much money as possible for their own personal gain. Instead the assumption is that, by identifying the way to follow their own heart they identify the way that they can be of most benefit to a wider group of people. While this script advocates a move away from the prescriptive and rigid values of the script one and a rejection of script two's central idea that happiness is external comfort that can be bought, all three scripts offer a distinct view of how young people should achieve happiness and how the country of Laos should develop.

Conclusion

The three shared happiness scripts identified in this chapter illustrate the most common ways that research participants used to organise and make sense of their beliefs about happiness. The scripts combine elements of the conceptual models of happiness as discussed in Chapter Four with the things that young volunteers say make them happy discussed in Chapter Five. They also contain additional normative elements, originating in the multiple influences upon research participants' lives, which emphasise the ways that they should act if they want to be happy.

Script one; 'the way to be happy is to be a good Lao person' incorporates elements of the conceptual model of 'happy being with others'. This script emphasises family and community, locating happiness in the virtue of fulfilling the expected social role ascribed to the individual. This script looks back longingly to a (possibly imagined) ideal past when traditional values were adhered to. Script two; "I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life", adheres to a view of life where happiness is located in a predominantly affective desire to be comfortable and for life to be easy for them and their loved ones. The commodities that research participants believed will provide this convenient and comfortable life and therefore "become happy" are external to the

young volunteers. It looks forward to the possible life that could be achieved if only young volunteers had the money to buy the things that it requires. Script three; “I am happy when I follow my heart” is, in common with script one, related to a judgement about what is valuable in life but in this case the judgement is made primarily by the individual based upon what is right for them via a process of self-awareness. It focuses inward in the present moment in order to become aware of the individual’s heart and mind in order to identify their individual route to happiness.

Each of the happiness scripts emphasises different themes from those identified in Chapter Five as the things that young volunteers say make them happy. However all three scripts in particular include a focus upon relationships and helping other people. Script one suggests a need to sacrifice individual will to the wider collective (either family or community) and to the socially ascribed ways that things are done. Script two suggests that the way to make others happy is not necessarily through presence but through buying things for them that will make their life more comfortable. Script three suggests that happiness that starts with self-awareness will spread out to those around and in turn make them happy.

The happiness scripts represent normative paths that young volunteers believe that they should follow in order to be or to become happy. However, life circumstances do not always follow the scripts and the following chapter examines the ways in which these commonly expressed normative scripts interact with the research participants’ everyday experiences.

Chapter Seven: Examining the scripts

Introduction

The eleven themes relating to the things that young volunteers say make them happy, as presented in Chapter Five, address Veenhoven's (2002) question about the things that people (in this instance young volunteers in Vientiane) consider when they rate their own happiness. The happiness scripts presented in the previous chapter move beyond the question of *what* young volunteers consider when they assess their happiness to examine *how* they consider these themes and *why* they think about them in the way that they do. The themes alone offer only a partial answer to the deeper question of how young volunteers in Vientiane think about and understand happiness but are woven together into an infinite number of different scripts, each illustrating an underlying set of similar beliefs held by young volunteers in Vientiane. The three scripts discussed illustrate the most common of these belief sets emerging from an analysis of my data looking at how young volunteers understand happiness and the things that make them happy.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the beliefs that underpin the happiness scripts are developed by young volunteers in response to the important influences in their lives and to different aspects of their social contexts. Subsequently I, as social researcher, am observing, choosing, interpreting and shaping these beliefs into common narratives that are shared by many of the young volunteers in Vientiane. This is not an arbitrary process but is based on a close analysis of a range of data collected over two years of intensive fieldwork interaction with young volunteers in Vientiane. It is, however, important to remember that there are several layers of construction involved in the development of the three happiness scripts.

The happiness scripts are important because they offer a series of structures to make sense of the ways that young volunteers think about and understand happiness. Built using the building blocks of the previously identified eleven themes about the things that young volunteers say make them happy, the scripts allow us to look below the surface of these themes and to examine the multiple meanings given to the combinations of different themes by the young volunteers. They offer us a framework for considering how the themes sometimes fit neatly together and how they sometimes pull against each other and how young volunteers can seemingly hold conflicting views about happiness simultaneously. They move us from a consideration of what young volunteers in Vientiane think is important for their happiness to a consideration of how young volunteers in Vientiane understand happiness.

However, both the realities of young volunteer's lives and the ways that they understand happiness are messy, confusing and contradictory. Jackson (2000) suggests that when we "impose narrative or intellectual order on our experiences" we inevitably "miss, gloss over, censor out or artificially fill in" the complex details of that experience which does not fit into the order that we attempt to impose (p. 328). Research is often ultimately about imposing a structure that helps us to think clearly about an issue. As social science researchers, if we do this well, the structure that we choose will adhere closely to and offer insights into the lived experience of the issue that we are researching; but it is still not the same as the actual issue. The themes and the stories of the previous three chapters represent a carefully considered analysis of the things that young volunteers in Vientiane told me about happiness but they do not represent the full picture. The messy reality of the lived experience of happiness leak out into the gaps between the closely considered theoretical framework.

I suggest therefore that both the structure and this messy reality have their place in the research. In this chapter I examine this tension between structure and reality. This chapter addresses the tension between a pragmatic need to present the data in a clear and useful manner while recognising that there are aspects of young volunteers' experiences and ways

of thinking that do not adhere to the straight lines of any theoretical model. I discuss the ways in which young volunteer's thinking about and experience of happiness deviate from the idea of three distinct happiness scripts outlined in the previous chapter. I conclude with a discussion of the implications that such socially constructed happiness scripts have for policy seeking to promote happiness and argue for policies that seek to provide opportunities for young people to examine some of these complex realities of happiness.

When life doesn't live up to the script

The happiness scripts represent how young volunteers understand happiness but do not necessarily represent the realities of their lives and their experiences. The themes represent either an ability to do something or an ideal functioning of a particular area of their life that they consider to be important, yet in reality a young volunteer may feel unable to do that thing or may not experience that area of their life in the ideal way that it described by research participants. Similarly the beliefs that underpin a particular happiness script may not be shared by all the people that surround the young volunteer. For example, just because young volunteers say that having a warm family is very important for their happiness does not actually mean that all of the young volunteers have a warm family.

Piker writes of rural Thai society in the lates 1960's that:

There is, however, abundant evidence that the villager dreams of a warmer and more trusting interpersonal world than the one that he actually inhabits. (1968:781)

This illustrates a potential tension between the life conditions related to interpersonal relationships and that of 'being able to follow my dreams'. If a young volunteer's dreams are related to the characteristics or behaviour of other people in their lives then they may have no control over this. Several young volunteers emotionally described this tension with respect to dreaming of having a warm family.

Not having a warm family is not only the absence of a condition that young volunteers think is important for their happiness but can indicate the presence of unhappiness, thus

demonstrating a connection between happiness and its opposite. In Laos language the opposite of *kwaam-suk* is *kwaam-tuk*, which is generally translated as ‘suffering’ and in the situation where a young volunteer does not have a warm family it seems that there is the possibility for two types of *kwaam-tuk*, firstly suffering related to any problems or difficulties within the family but secondly suffering that is that related to your family not living up to the shared story of how a Lao family should be.

This can be illustrated using the experiences of one young female 15-year-old volunteer, San. I had spent time with San in the volunteer group and, from informal conversations, I knew a little about her particular family background, so that when in an interview setting she said that her happiness was related to having a warm family I knew that I wanted to explore this further and felt that our relationship enabled me to do so:

Christina: what makes you happy?

San: Having a warm family where all the faces can see each other.

C: And now...do you have a warm family?

S: No

C: So...what is a warm family? What would make your family warm?

S: Having father, mother and children who stay together all the time, being able to see parents every day – that is happiness

Later in the interview San told me that her mother had died when San was in her fourth year of primary school and that she now lives with other relatives while her father lives in a different city with his new wife. In the same interview, when asked about her happiest memories, San said:

(The time in my life when I was happiest was) when my mother was alive because my mother, father, younger sister and I were together. When my mother was here we were happy together all the time but after I came to live with my relatives the happiness decreased.

San talks about several different aspects of this situation which affect her happiness. She thinks that proximity to her parents is important to her happiness and yet she has been separated from both her parents. On a separate occasion, in a research workshop, during a group activity looking at the things in young volunteers’ lives that are most important or

precious to them, San said: “the one thing I have lost is a parent and I want both my parents to come back but this is impossible”.

It is possible that San’s perception of how important her parent’s proximity is to her happiness is heightened because of their actual lack of proximity – in a similar way to how young volunteers identified that they took the importance of good health for granted until it was under threat. However, as seen in Chapter Five, proximity features prominently in several of the themes identified as the things that make young volunteers happy, including; ‘having a warm family’ ‘having good friends’ and ‘being able to be together and do things together’.

San’s relationship with her aunt, one of the relatives that she lives with, is challenging since San wants to continue to get a high education and wants to be a volunteer but her aunt doesn’t value education and doesn’t understand volunteering, thinking that San should instead be earning money. San talks regularly about this relationship and is open about finding it upsetting. Indeed when I asked her in the interview if she could tell me about something in the last couple of days that had made her happy she laughed and said: “yesterday I was happy because my aunt didn’t argue with me”. San obviously cares deeply about and respects her father who gives her advice and supports her to study and volunteer, but she is not able to be in contact with him regularly because he lives in an area with poor mobile phone reception.

When I ask San if she can see any way that this situation could be resolved, she says:

My father is afraid that his two daughters cannot accept his new wife so he stays there (his new home). If he wants to bring his new wife to come to live here...ok... because I know he has a new wife and I can accept it because if my father is happy I cannot stop him and we can live together happily... *bo phen nyang*.

Without speaking to him it is impossible to know if San’s father interprets this situation in the same way as his daughter, but San considers that having her father nearby is very important for her happiness.

However, in addition to her obviously very real desire to live with her father, it seems that San has a normative sense of how her life should be. The theme of ‘having a warm family’ features in all three of the happiness stories identified in the previous chapter, but it is particularly strong in the story that says that ‘happiness is being a good Lao person’. In the interview, when she talks about the things that make her happy and the things that are important for her happiness San almost exclusively talks about having a warm family – and when she does talk about other things such as education or volunteering it is in the context of the support and/or lack of support that she gets in these areas from members of her family. On a separate occasion I chatted to San as we watched a football match being played at the centre where she volunteered. I asked her whether she had enjoyed a research workshop that she had taken part in the previous weekend she said that she had enjoyed it but that all of the other volunteers talk about happiness being ‘having a warm family’ and she doesn’t have a warm family so it makes her sad when they say that. She went on to say that families are important for Lao people and that she doesn’t understand why her family are not warm and do not take care of each other in the way that most Lao families do. Not only does San think that having a warm family would make her happy, but she is comparing herself and her family to the other volunteers and to the shared story that they will be happy if they are good Lao people, and she finds that they do not compare well. San was trying to be a good Lao person but the other people in her life do not always follow the script that demands mutual obligation and close proximity to the people that you love.

San was not the only example of young volunteers whose life circumstances did not live up to the happiness script that they held. Phet, a 19 year old female volunteer, discussed in an interview how she had made the very unusual decision to move away from her family because she believed that if she continued to live with them she would risk not being a good Lao person. She has found a new home in the *wat* (Buddhist temple) in her home

village, where she has lived with the monks and nuns for the past year⁵¹. Phet's experiences illustrate how a young volunteer's life experiences can result in a change to the primary script that they follow.

Whereas the happiness script that "the way to be happy is to be a good Lao person" generally emphasizes the role of a warm family, in this young woman's case she felt that her family were preventing her from following this script. Phet's family are obviously important to her and she said that the happiest time in her life was "when I lived with my family, being all together in the family talking with each other and going to places together". Phet is still in contact with her family and, when asked about something on the day of the interview that had made her happy, she told me about how she had returned to her family home to care for her mother who was ill. However the difficulties within Phet's family were severe enough that she felt that she had to leave them in order to be a good Lao person. Although Phet avoided questions that sought to uncover why she believed that this was the case, she implied that her family's problems included alcohol abuse and said that if she stayed she was worried that she will spent all her time going out and getting into trouble with her friends like other people in the family.

Phet tried to follow the happiness script that says she will be happy if she is a good Lao person and yet the different aspects of the script were not coming together in the way that the script required; her family were supposed to support her to be a good person and she judged that they are not doing so. In this script knowledge about happiness comes from outside of the individual and happiness depends upon following moral rules imposed by others. These others are generally senior family members but, at the time that I met her,

⁵¹ Traditionally the *wat* was the centre of each village in Laos and played an important social welfare function in Laos society. Although this role has been somewhat taken over by NGOs and development agencies, there are still often boys or young men and, less commonly girls or young women who stay in the temple with the monks and nuns because of their family's inability to take good care of them (see, for example, Canda and Phaobtong 1992).

Phet had turned to the moral authority of the Buddhist Sangha. Buddhism was important to Phet and she was vocal about the importance of following the rules that she associated with Buddhism and with being a good Lao person. She often complained that other volunteers at the centre did not always wear polite clothing and did not always speak to their elders in an appropriately respectful manner. Being a good person was ultimately more important for Phet than the happiness that she felt from being with her family. The other volunteers sometimes indicated that they considered Phet old-fashioned and said that she followed too strictly by the rules. However, in making this decision to move away from her family Phet has done something that challenges the social norm indicated by other young volunteers where family represent a uniquely strong bond and set of obligations.

Although Phet's family are important to her she believed that in order to become happy in the future she needed to follow the rules of being a good Lao person. However, in this difficult set of life circumstances, Phet indicates that she has learned something new about happiness; that she can look inside herself to find happiness rather than looking to her relationships with other people. When asked about the link between her happiness and other people's happiness, Phet says: "other people make us happy and we make other people happy too but I've learned one more thing, if we don't get happiness from others we can make the happiness inside ourselves." Phet is one of only a small number of research participants who cites the importance of Buddhism as intrinsically valuable rather than valuable because of its connection to national and familial identity. Buddhism is important to her because of the social moral rules and practices that it requires, but it is also important because of the benefit to the individual. Phet says "when I am meditating or inside the temple my mind is together, with religion we will be *sabai-jai*, when we have a problem we can solve the problem". Although her family and being a good person were still vitally important to Phet, she had discovered that her happiness was not dependent upon other people and that she could create her own happiness inside herself. This discovery reflects the script that "I am happy when I follow my heart" and indicates a level of individuality and self-reliance that has developed through dealing with difficult circumstances.

Life circumstances making it difficult or impossible for young volunteers to follow the happiness scripts was also seen with reference to the scripts “I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life” and “I am happy when I follow my heart”. In happiness script two: “I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life”, some volunteers express hopelessness and a lack of belief that they ever can get the things that they perceive they need to have a comfortable and easy life. Other volunteers indicated that they would follow happiness script three that says that “I am happy when I follow my heart” but that other things needed to be in place before they did so. For example one research participant said that what her heart wanted to do was to be a teacher in the countryside but that she needed to take care of her mum and her younger brother before she did so. In both of these cases the most common cause of this disjuncture between happiness script and perception of reality was a lack of resources, particularly money.

Appadurai argues that the globalised world is characterised by movement or ‘flow’ and that the multiple flows that impact upon peoples’ lives are in disjunctive relationships both with each other and with the national structures and institutions (2000). Although we continue to tell stories in order to make sense of the world these disjunctive flows challenge the possibility of any experience that unproblematically follows a linear narrative. One example that Appadurai gives of such a disjuncture is between global information and local realities:

Media flows across national boundaries that produce images of well-being that cannot be satisfied by national standards of living and consumer capabilities (Appadurai 2000: 6).

This variance between what people have and what they think that they need in order to be happy becomes particularly stark in a city such as Vientiane where young volunteers have increasing information about the rest of the world but often do not have the resources to make the choices that the internet and knowledge about other possible ways of life presents to them.

As discussed above, this disjuncture between that to which they aspire and that which they perceive to be available to them can be seen in many different ways in young volunteers' lives. Another example is mobile phones. In 2007 in Laos there were 24.9 mobile phone contracts for every 100 people but by 2012 the number of contracts had risen to 101.9 per 100 people⁵². Mobile phones were important for the current research participants, almost all of them had a phone of some description although the age and functionality varied dramatically. Mobile phones are not only an indicator of globalisation but also a conveyor of globalisation; more expensive mobile phones are likely to give the owner the possibility of connecting to the internet and therefore to international information and social networking sites. Branding is also important; a few of the wealthier young volunteers had iPhones which were normally obtained second hand from Thailand and which (as seen in VIG2's story on page 204) conveyed some status. On one occasion, as I sat with a big group of young volunteers eating a communal lunch on rush mats outside the mud hut office at PVG, I became aware that a group of young men were poring over a page that had been torn out of a magazine. When I went over to them I saw that the page was an advert for expensive mobile phones. With an expression that seemed to me a combination of awe and bemusement one young man pointed at one phone that had a price tag of 14,000,000 LAK (approximately £1050.00 at the time of writing). He laughed nervously and asked me if I thought that was expensive, seeming quite relieved when I said that I thought it was very expensive. We continued to look at the advert in silence for a few minutes and then I wondered aloud why anyone would ever spend that much money on a phone. There was no answer.

⁵² <http://data.worldbank.org/country/lao-pdr?display=graph> (Accessed: 12th June 2014)

Overlapping and multiple scripts

The examples above show that young volunteer's life circumstances do not always live up to the happiness script that they follow. However, even when life circumstances do broadly allow the young volunteers to follow the happiness scripts, it must be noted that young volunteers do not make a straightforward choice to align themselves with one or other of the scripts. In the following section I look first at how the scripts are not mutually exclusive but often blur into each other and then subsequently explore the reality that young volunteers often hold multiple scripts simultaneously.

The diagram below illustrates the most common overlap between the different scripts which are all formed from the central core of the twelve themes that young volunteers identified as the things that are most important to make them happy.

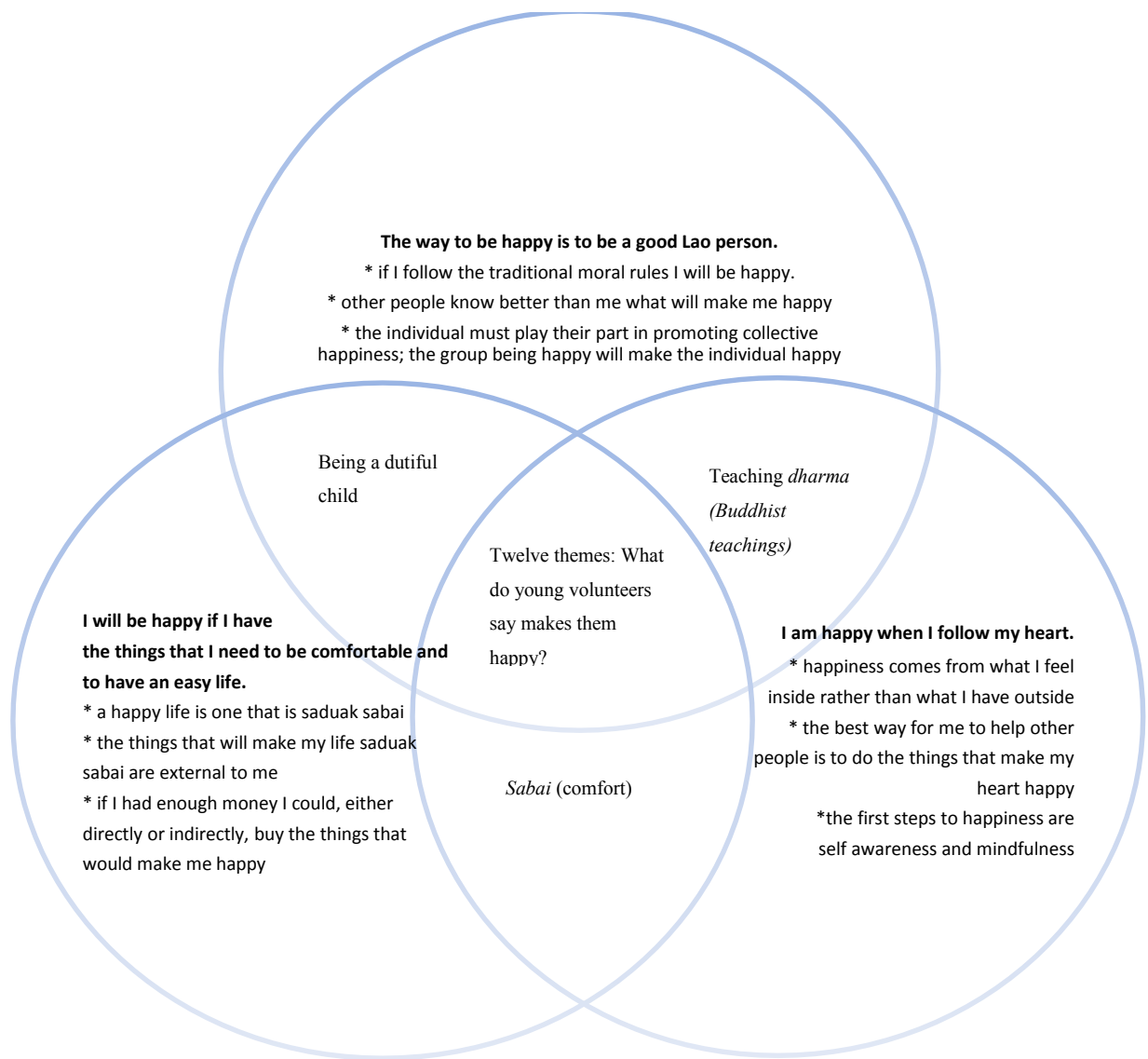


Figure 4: overlapping happiness scripts.

Being a dutiful child

One overlap between the scripts that “the way to be happy is to be a good Lao person” and “I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life” is the idea that the child has a duty to his/her parents. This duty, and the related idea of a debt that children have to their parents, is well documented in the literature, but is usually considered to be a gendered issue and it is only the daughter that is expected to be “dutiful”

through-out their lifetime rather than the son who only has to pay a one-time service of merit:

(The debt owed to parents) is especially significant for young women who, unlike their brothers, cannot serve as Buddhist monks to earn religious merit for their parents. Spending a few months as a monk remains among the most important obligations a son has to his mother and father, one that can often take precedence over economic contributions. Daughters, however, are raised to express their gratitude and loyalty by attending to the day-to-day needs of household members. They are expected to be more industrious and responsible than their brothers in such matters (Mills 1997: 42)

The role of the dutiful daughter is often linked to migration and to moving away from the family in order to provide for them economically (Mills, 1997; Rigg, 2007).

In the current research, however, I did not find a gendered distinction in either whether participants felt that they had a debt to their parents or how they felt that this should be repaid. The only exception to this is that male participants were able to become monks and thereby earn merit for their parents but female participants talked similarly about making merit for their parents by giving alms and attending ceremonies at the *wat*. Similarly, both male and female research participants felt a duty to provide economically for their family and believed that it would make them happy to do so. The primary distinction in ways of being a dutiful child was therefore not gendered but a difference between how that duty should be fulfilled. This difference divided by way of the first two happiness scripts; in the first script this duty is primarily related to a mutual reciprocity of *care* where as in the second script this duty is primarily related to the exchange of *goods*.

This difference can be illustrated by the experiences of Tik, a 19 year old young male volunteer who had been a novice in a Buddhist temple for 7 years at the time of the research. In conversations I asked why he had become a novice monk and he told me that it was partly because of the education that he would receive if he lived in the *wat* and attended the *wat* school, and partly because his family believed that his position as a novice monk would bring merit to his parents and particularly to his mother. The decision for him

to become a novice was therefore partly forward thinking with an eye on future educational achievement but was also retrospective, fulfilling his duty to his family who had brought him in to the earth and raised him.

Tik was extremely committed to the Buddhist *Dharma* and his temple. However, across my fieldwork period I became aware that our conversations changed focus and he began to talk about how his family now wanted him to leave the temple because they believed that the best way that he could fulfil his duty to his parents was by getting a job and earning money to support them.

This change of perception in the best way to fulfil this duty may have been as a result of personal changing family circumstances or it may be as a result of structural change in the importance of money in Lao society as perceived by young volunteers and discussed in Chapter 5, page 173. It may also reflect a changing idea of what it means to be a “good Lao person”. What this young volunteer was clear about was that he had originally felt that it was his duty to become a novice monk in order to make merit for his parents and now he felt that it was his duty to leave the temple in order to make money for his parents and siblings. His sense of his own happiness was split; he was clear that it was his happiness to fulfil his duty to his family who he loved, but he was also committed to the Buddhist *Dharma* and *sangha* and his time in the temple had been very happy.

Teaching Dharma

One overlap between the happiness scripts “the way to be happy is to be a good Lao person” and “I am happy when I follow my heart” centres upon Buddhist religion. However, while Buddhism is important to both scripts, the parts of *Dharma* that are emphasised and taught to children and young people are quite different.

Buddhism is important from the perspective of the happiness script of “the way to be happy is to be a good Lao person” as far as it represents a set of rules and supports a particular political view about what it means to be a good Lao person. This happiness script emphasises the ways of acting in relation to other people and in society, particularly the

social hierarchies and social role that have historically been emphasised in Laos. One example of this is modes of greeting. There is an apocryphal story that immediately after the revolution the traditional Lao *nop*⁵³ was discouraged after the regime change in 1975 in favour of a more secular handshake but that this change was quickly reversed. Speculation suggests that Lao people did not feel comfortable with the physical contact necessary to shake hands and also that the ideological equality inherent in a handshake was initially to be encouraged but then discouraged as social hierarchies were increasingly re-emphasised by the regime (see, for example, Cooper 2008:69). A complex set of variations of the *nop* greeting exist based on the social hierarchies of the two people involved. However, although during my time in Vientiane the *nop* was the most common greeting, I was rarely able to distinguish different levels of *nop* except in greetings with members of the Buddhist *Sangha*. Among some young volunteers in varying levels of closeness of friendship, handshakes and hugs were the normal greeting, but this was extremely variable and adhered to complex social rules among different social groups and genders.

However, despite these slowly changing norms among young people, the happiness script “the way to be happy is to be a good Lao person” suggests that the path to happiness is a return to clear hierarchical social relationships. Therefore, the dominant model of teaching Dharma in school focuses on social practices that reinforce these hierarchies including the ways that children should respectfully greet their seniors and the ways that they show their respect and fulfil their duty to their parents. Several of the research participants taught Buddhist *Dharma* as part of their volunteering activities and I often observed that the primary method of teaching was for a novice to stand at the front of the classroom and for

⁵³ “*Nop* is the action of raising both hands, palms flat and joined and lowering your head. It is not just a way of saying hello without words it is more a public literal demonstration of the ‘height rule’: in any social encounter between two or more people, the social inferior takes on a physically inferior position and the social superior assumes a posture of physical superiority.” (Cooper 2008: 69)

the students, sitting in rows on benches before him, to recite religious teachings and poems by rote.

Conversely, the happiness script “I am happy when I follow my heart” reflects the focus in the Buddhist dharma of looking inward and paying attention to the workings of the mind, including thoughts and feelings. One research participant explained the importance of this awareness of mind saying:

Lots of people they just graduate or get high qualifications but they do not develop their thinking...their mind...they just think ‘oh I need more money...this job has better pay...so I just learn this to.... (interview: Pith)

This emphasis on an internal focus of individual’s training her/his own heart or mind can be seen reflected in a slogan for an education for sustainable development programme that was active in Lao civil society during the fieldwork period; ‘education of the heart is the heart of education’. Several of the NPAs encouraged children and young people to take part in a short group meditation before any activity and young volunteers teaching *Dharma* in schools started and ended each class with a short meditation. When asked the reason for doing these meditations, young volunteers said that it was to focus and to make the mind calm, to become *jai yen*.

When asked about the connection between *Dharma* and happiness, one research participant who was both a young Lao volunteer and a Buddhist monk said:

In Buddhism developing the mind of the people is the first step to happiness. If you develop the minds of the people then everyone will be happy. (interview, Tik)

The ambiguity in the personal pronouns used in this quotation illustrates the different approaches to the *Dharma* adopted by the two happiness scripts. “The way to be happy is to be a good Lao person” emphasises teaching other people how to follow the rules in order to be a good person. “I am happy when I follow my heart” emphasises teaching individuals to develop the skill of controlling their mind in order to see beyond the rules or norms imposed by other people and identify what their heart wants to do. The distinction is about whether teaching the *Dharma* is about developing *their* minds or about teaching people to

develop their *own* mind. This distinction can also be seen in the end goal of such education. The same research participant quoted above explains in a different way that the reason for teaching *Dharma* is to “teach them how to live peacefully and happily together” (interview, Tik). Happiness script one suggests that if everyone follows the rules then they will live together happily and peacefully; happiness script three suggests that if all individuals learned to develop and live by their own hearts and minds then they would find that they could live together peacefully and happily.

Sabai

As has previously been discussed on pages 140 and 203, the word *sabai* has multiple connotations and these cut across the happiness scripts of “I will be happy if I have the things I need to be comfortable and have an easy life” and “I am happy when I follow my heart”.

Sabai is generally translated as “comfortable”, and is notably a part of the most common greetings of *sabai-dee* (literally translated as “good comfortable”, used similarly to hello and goodbye in English language) and *sabai-dee bor?* (literally translated as “are you good comfortable?” and used in a very similar way to “how are you doing” in English). As in English, these phrases have moved away from their literal meanings and are now more general markers of greeting and relationship rather than sharing any accurate information about a person’s level of comfort. However, as discussed in Chapter Four, *sabai-jai*, directly translated as “comfortable heart” is commonly translated as either “happy” or “at ease” and refers to an internal state of having no worries or concerns. When I talked about the stress that I was experiencing as a result of the long and uncertain wait to get my research permission, I was frequently counselled “*sabai sabai*”, meaning approximately “take it easy”, “don’t stress”, “everything will be alright”. Alternatively, when visiting people’s homes it is common to hear the same exhortation “*sabai sabai*”, meaning “make yourself at home”, “be comfortable”.

However, when young volunteers used the word *sabai* in conjunction with the word *saduak* (generally translated as “convenient”) to create the phrase “*saduak sabai*” the emphasis

shifts subtly. Young volunteers used this phrase to refer to a belief that a comfortable, convenient and easy life will come about when they have all of the external things that they perceive that they (and in many cases their families and friends) need. And in order to get these external goods they need to have money to buy them. The phrase *saduak sabai* was therefore commonly used by young people talking about happiness, with particular reference to the sort of life that they wanted to have in the future and the sorts of external things that would provide them with such a life.

The difference between these two uses of the word *sabai* closely reflect the two happiness scripts “I am happy when I follow my heart” and “I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and to have an easy life”. The first usage is about state of mind, research participants assume that they have everything inside them that they need to be *sabai-jai* and the things that they need to achieve this are related to calming their mind, focusing more and worrying less. The second usage assumes that the things necessary in order to be *saduak sabai* are external to the individual and that making more money will enable them to acquire these things.

Multiple scripts

In addition to the ways in which the happiness scripts overlap, they also coexist. The reality of the young volunteer’s lives is that there are multiple conflicting influences telling them different stories about the way that they should live their lives. While the ways that some research participants talked about happiness suggested that they followed one clear script, others simultaneously followed multiple happiness scripts in a sometimes conflicting and often inconsistent fashion. Sometimes young volunteers followed different scripts in different areas of their lives and sometimes they appear to switch between scripts in the same area of their life.

One common example of this tendency to move between different scripts is the beliefs that some young volunteers have about happiness and money. As discussed on page 173, research participants often expressed ambivalence about the relationship between money and happiness. I often had a sense that young volunteers thought that the *correct* answer

was that money *shouldn't* be important for their happiness but the reality was that money was vital in their lives and that it was difficult to be happy if you have no money.

We can go anywhere that we want to go if we have money. I can't live without money. (workshop: PVG)

In several cases where young volunteers talked about money being vital for their happiness – a view congruent with the consumer theme of the happiness script “I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life” - I noted in my fieldnotes that they used an almost apologetic tone of voice, as if they thought that it was not the answer that I wanted to hear. On several other occasions different young volunteers talked about how money as the thing that they need in order to be happy but quickly went on to clarify that, of course, they do not believe that if you have money you will not necessarily be happy, a view that could reflect either “the way to be happy is to be a good Lao person” or “I am happy when I follow my heart”.

Conversely one young volunteer talked emotionally in an interview about the impacts of her parents prioritising making money over spending time with their family, saying:

It is more important to me to have time to spend with the people in my family, that will make me more happy and is better than money because sometimes money might tear families apart. Parents might separate and have to go out to find money and that is not happiness – I prefer to have my parents spend time with me. No money is ok. (interview: Tang)

This quotation, emphasising the importance of a warm family that stays together, reflects the happiness script that “the way to be happy is to be a good Lao person”. However minutes later in the same interview she said that something that would make her happy would be if she had a new mobile phone but she could not have one because her parents do not have enough money to buy her one, reflecting the script that “I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life”.

Is some happiness more ‘real’ than other happiness?

The happiness scripts are constructed using the themes of what young volunteers say make them happy, which are combined in different ways according to related sets of beliefs held by the young volunteers about happiness. These scripts tell us something about the ways that young volunteers understand happiness but, as we have seen earlier in this chapter in the example of San, they can also impact upon young volunteers’ happiness.

The things that young volunteers say make them happy may or may not in actuality make them happy. The beliefs about the world that underpin the happiness scripts may be true or false (or indeed this may be an irrelevant question depending upon our ontological or epistemological beliefs about truth). As a happiness researcher who places significant epistemological and political value upon the privileged knowledge that people have about their own lives, one of the challenges of studying happiness is the research that has shown that people are generally not good at predicting what will make them happy (Ekman et al. 2005: 60). As is noted on page 37 the notion of self-reporting happiness has long been considered problematic when debating whether a consideration of subjectivity should be included in policy development and is, in particular, one criticism of subjective wellbeing indicators. Yet I have argued that happiness is fundamentally a subjective concept and it is difficult to understand in what sense anybody can tell someone else what makes them happy. Therefore the happiness scripts are important not because they are necessarily ‘true’ in any sense (i.e. they do not tell us what happiness *is* or what actually makes young volunteers happy) but because they tell us some of the most common ways in which young volunteers perceive happiness and what they think makes them happy or will make them happy.

But there remains a question about whether there is something else, perhaps some more ‘real’ or ‘genuine’ happiness, that lies beneath the scripts. This question becomes even more important if we return our attention back to a consideration of the potential for development policy to promote happiness. The ways that young volunteers conceptualise

happiness takes several different forms, they identified eleven things that they think make them happy and follow multiple scripts about how to achieve happiness. Upon which bit of this big picture should policy to promote happiness focus? In amongst the multiple conceptual models, assumptions, beliefs, values and scripts, is there a sense in which some are more accurate than others; or is there some other elusive element of ‘true’ happiness that has so far been missing from the picture presented?

Several young volunteers talked about such a distinction between true and false happiness, but this distinction may simply show a preference for one or more of the happiness scripts over another. One example of this is a 22-year-old male Pith who, in an interview, reflected upon the link between happiness and development and made the following distinction:

Happiness is not when you get whatever you want...that is not the real happiness. Real happiness is when we see the people, all the people, are happy. Sometimes in development they just increase GDP but they don’t care about other things...other people’s lives...that’s why I don’t think it is sustainable development. Sometimes they just...they look for their own happiness but destroy other people’s lives.

Pith’s definition of ‘real happiness’ draws on two of the happiness scripts outlined in the previous chapter. He invokes the duty to other people that is so central to the script that ‘the way to be happy is to be a good Lao person’ and the value of sustainable development which underpins at least one interpretation of the script that ‘I am happy when I follow my heart’ in order to contradict the story that ‘I will be happy when I have the things I need to be comfortable and have an easy life’. When Pith refers to that which is “not the real happiness”, he is referring to the focus on money and external things that can be purchased which is central to the latter happiness script.

However, when Pith tries to further define real happiness he gets confused and ends up having to admit defeat:

I don’t think that real happiness is about thinking. Sometimes there is no clear rule because eating the cake makes you happy but by eating it you are destroying yourself because when you eat too much cake you become fat. I don’t mean that there is no real

happiness just that some things that we think have much
happiness are really like imaginary happiness. Sometimes we just
imagine something will make us happy. So that's why I don't
know what is the real happiness.

Pith is struggling with the same questions that I outline above about whether anything more real exists beyond the happiness scripts; it seems to him that sometimes the things that we think make us happy don't last or also cause us suffering and he wonders how we can know if there is anything more real than the insufficient stories that we tell ourselves about happiness.

It is interesting that Pith starts this exploration of 'real happiness' by suggesting that real happiness is not about thinking. In daily conversations and in more formal research interaction, young volunteers frequently used the phrases 'thinking about a lot of things' or 'thinking too much' in conjunction with words such as 'worry' 'stress' 'serious' and 'headache' ; all of which were considered to be impediments to happiness. However, as discussed on page 178, one of the reasons that 'being *jai yen*' is thought to be something that makes young volunteers happy is that it enables them to think calmly and slowly in order to solve any problems that might occur. It seems that most young volunteers believe that the way that they think impacts upon their happiness; thinking slowly about one thing at a time is more likely to make them happy than rushed and unfocused thinking about too many things which may make them stressed or worried. Pith supported this view that the way people think impacts upon their happiness and explored the possibility that there is some other kind of happiness (that which he terms 'real happiness') that exists beyond the happiness that is imagined or thought.

As discussed in Chapter One, positive psychology makes the distinction between different aspects of happiness related to positive affect or to cognitive assessments and one possibility is that some happiness may be experienced directly rather than mediated through thought. Several young volunteers described particular moments or experiences in this way, most often in relation to trying to explain particular words related to happiness. For example one young volunteer described the word *seung* in the following way:

Seung is the happiness that I feel deep inside myself. It is different to happiness that I get when I think about things outside me.

In a research workshop another young volunteer, Nong, said that love was very important for her happiness. When I asked her later in an informal conversation why that was the case Nong said that feeling loved made her feel *suk-jai*⁵⁴ and, when I asked her if she could describe the feeling of *suk-jai* she said:

When I say that I am *suk-jai* it means that I am happy but I cannot explain to other people but I know that I am happy. Like when I listen to music and, yes, I love this song but I cannot explain why, I don't know how to explain to someone else that oh this song makes me happy inside my body and my heart.

However, Nussbaum (2001) argues that the distinction between feeling happy and thinking that you are happy is problematic since a feeling or emotion is always preceded by a thought. This argument is mirrored by Ekman et al. (2005) who say that, “the fact that there is no term in Buddhism for emotion is quite consistent with what scientists have come to learn about the anatomy of the brain. Every region in the brain that has been identified with some aspect of emotion has also been identified with aspects of cognition” (p. 59). In Lao language this distinction between thinking and feeling is further blurred by the word ‘*jit-jai*’ which (as discussed on page 212) includes elements of the English language concepts of heart and mind. In line with the key distinction made by Ekman et al. between sensual pleasure and *sukha* (2005: 60), for Sombath Somphone the important distinction is not whether or not happiness is ‘real’ or between feeling happy and thinking oneself happy but about whether or not happiness is lasting. In an interview for this research he suggested that ‘thought’ is a sixth sense that is rarely considered and that happiness that comes from

⁵⁴ This was the only instance in the data that a young volunteer uses this particular word for happiness.

thoughts, or indeed happiness that comes from any of the other five senses, can only ever be temporary:

(We must) understand that these are sense happiness, these are temporary. If you know they are temporary you are not likely to be addicted to them...it's temporary... I enjoy it but I know it's temporary....But we only take account of the 5 senses, not the sixth sense. The mind has been left out and it goes off on its own and so the mind is very tricky, it's not easy to understand , making thoughts up based on the things outside us.

Somphone does not suggest that these sensory happiness are not real, but argues that, in line with teachings from the *Dharma* about impermanence, we are not able to make this happiness last. This sense of the temporary nature of happiness is reflected not only in frequent fleeting moments of everyday happiness observed throughout my fieldwork, but also in the reflection of young volunteers. In one research workshop I asked the group whether it was possible to ever be 100% happy. This question resulted in a long discussion about how there have been moments in life when all of the participants could remember feeling 100% happy but that those moments last only a very short time.

In the discussion mentioned above the volunteers went on to discuss how 100% happiness would mean no suffering and yet that life is usually a mixture of happiness and suffering; moments of 100% happiness are, in their opinion, fleeting and generally precipitated by unusually positive experiences such as very good news or being somewhere that is extremely beautiful. Somphone suggests, however, that the suffering is caused by a lack of awareness of (or denial of) the temporary nature of sensory happiness and that the things that make us happy can be a source of suffering if we expect them to remain. In order to avoid this suffering he suggests that it is necessary to look inward, to become aware of the nature of the thoughts and, ultimately, to control the mind.

It's all in the mind. Your mind is used to just accepting things, so we must train it to really analyse things, especially to analyse yourself. We are always in judgement about things outside of us, but we have been trained that we should distract away from the self, and therefore the self becomes based on what is out there...Our path to happiness is defined by our mind and, when

we have no control over our mind, it means that there is somebody else controlling our happiness.

Somphone suggests both that sensory happiness is always temporary and that the only way to move towards a longer lasting happiness is to turn attention inward and train the mind (*jit-jai*) to focus and analyse the stories that we are told rather than just to accept them.

While it is outwith the scope and research paradigm of the current research to establish whether there is such a thing as *real happiness* that exists beyond the perceptions of happiness held by the research participants, it is necessary to note that young volunteers point to the possibility of something existing beyond the happiness scripts that they follow. This mirrors the participative research paradigm set out in Chapter Three where Heron and Reason (1997) argue that, although there is the possibility of an objective reality this is extremely difficult to know and so what is most immediately important is developing living knowledge through experience and interaction. In this paradigm, independently of the possibility of a 'real happiness' it is important for young volunteers, individually and together, to become aware of and challenge their beliefs and scripts about happiness, both in order to make choices about which scripts to follow and to examine the possibility that some happiness might be more real than others.

Somphone suggests that this process of challenging our thoughts and beliefs takes place through looking inward and training the individual mind. Without denying that this is one possible route to this end, an unexpected finding from my research was that the fieldwork process itself could provide valuable opportunities for participants to examine their feelings and interrogate their perceptions of happiness in conversation with each other and with me.

When I first arrived in Vientiane and described my research, many people, both foreigners and Lao people, expressed the view that it must be very difficult to encourage Lao people to talk about their feelings in order to get the data that I needed. In some ways of course this is true and I discuss this further in Chapter Three where I discuss my research methodology. My commitment to an extended period of fieldwork and my methodological emphasis on building trusting relationships were central to engaging young volunteers. For

the first few months that I was in Vientiane most research participants gave fairly monosyllabic answers to my questions about emotions and all of these answers were very similar; even for young volunteers who worked with organisations promoting wellbeing, it was difficult to engage openly with the topic. My experience was that young volunteers only started to share reflections and experiences that were outside of the most common happiness stories after they felt comfortable with me and trusted that they were safe to talk about their feelings.

However, as my own fieldwork progressed I began to think less in terms of ‘finding ways to get young volunteers to engage with my research topic’ and more about ‘providing opportunities for young volunteers to talk about happiness’. This shift had its origins in an observation in fieldnotes written after a research workshop with young volunteers about halfway through the fieldwork period:

At the end of the workshop I said thank-you to everyone for being there and participating so openly in the discussion. Several of the participants laughed and said that they wanted to thank me because they had enjoyed the workshop and they hoped that I would run more soon.

I started to notice the repeated times when volunteers thanked me for organising activities related to the research or where they indicated that they had enjoyed taking part in the research. Often these related the opportunity to spend time with their friends and do activities related to the research to the discussions about things that made them happy.

I am happy today because I have the opportunity to talk with Christina about happiness and do activities with my friends that make me know new things about myself and my friends
(workshop: DCY&DC)

While there was possibly an element on these occasions that the young volunteers were saying something that they thought would make me happy, this also seems to relate to the subsequently identified themes about things that young volunteers say make them happy of ‘good friends’ and ‘being able to be together and go places together’. It seems that my research methodology offered some of the conditions that young volunteers say make them happy.

However, I also came to believe that there was something else involved in these expressions of gratitude. When I had first been influenced by Co-operative Inquiry as I planned my research methodology I had hoped that the young volunteers would engage in the research as co-researchers (Heron 1996) but the challenges of working with this model in the Lao setting and in the context of a PhD project had quickly become apparent, as discussed on page 103. As the fieldwork period progressed I realized that, while the young volunteers might not be truly co-researchers in the Cooperative Inquiry sense of the term, they were in one sense co-inquirers who were both learning from the research process and interested in the things that they were learning.

This interest and learning was expressed in different ways. Several volunteers indicated that they had never thought much about their own happiness before and that they found it interesting. After an interview one male young volunteer expressed his thanks for my questions and said “I’ve never thought about these things before, they are very interesting questions” (interview: Kith). Similarly, another young volunteer said after an interview: “I think when you ask me questions it is good because it makes me think, and some things that I think are new.” (interview: Lee)

On multiple occasions I would hear volunteers exclaiming in workshops that “this is so interesting!” especially during exercises where they got to hear different views about the same topic or question from different groups or individuals. On one occasion, during an animated group conversation about happiness and romantic relationships involving 6 young volunteers from PVG who were already very close friends, the female young volunteer who was helping me with translation paused mid-sentence to say “it’s so interesting...to hear what all my friends think. Usually we don’t talk together like this.”

Other volunteers talked about the benefits that they perceived of talking and thinking about happiness. In an interview, one male young volunteer linked the idea that happiness is contagious with a belief that thinking about happiness can make people happy.

If we try to communicate with other people about what makes us happy we can influence their happiness – maybe

the other person will think about what is their happiness and we might make them happy. (interview: Song)

In a conversation towards the end of the fieldwork period, Nalee, another research participant who had been involved throughout the fieldwork period, reflected on my research saying:

Your research will really help people because when you ask them about their happiness people begin to explain and sometimes people really want to tell others what they are happy about, but nobody asks. (fieldnotes: 27.9.2012)

This young woman seems to agree with the young man who gave the previous quotation, that thinking about and sharing thoughts about happiness can make people happy.

Other young volunteers, through the experience of being involved in the research process, demonstrated the process of challenging the happiness stories that they held. One example of this is during a discussion after watching a documentary named “Happy” which shows interviews with people around the world about the things that make them happy⁵⁵, I asked the group of young volunteers whether their opinions about happiness had changed during watching the film. There was a long pause and then one young man spoke very hesitantly and shyly, saying:

Before (watching the film) I thought that having money to spend is the most important thing for happiness, but I changed (after watching the film). It is not necessary to have lots of money, it is more important that we are just satisfied in what we have and then we will have happiness. (fieldnotes: 13.8.12)

When he finished saying this there was enthusiastic applause from the rest of the group and the young volunteer smiled broadly. This demonstrates that discussion and new input can (at least temporarily) change the way that people think about happiness. However, it also once more demonstrates that thoughts about happiness are open to external influence. This

⁵⁵ For more information see www.thehappymovie.com (Accessed: 10th July 2014).

volunteer is expressing the normative view of happiness that is promoted by the documentary. Unfortunately, this research participant only attended this one discussion and therefore it was not possible to follow-up and see if this new point of view prevailed but, in the light of ambivalent opinions about money expressed through-out this research, it seems likely that there may be some dialogic process between this new idea that money is not the most important thing for happiness and the day to day realities of his life where money might not be the most important thing but is still important. This example, however, illustrates Appadurai's belief in the importance of "the role of the imagination in social life" which is "the faculty through which collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life emerge" (2000: 6). Through watching the film and discussing his ideas with others in the group this young volunteer was able, however fleetingly, to imagine a different understanding of happiness.

In an interview, Phou, a female young volunteer who had just started working for an NGO promoting education in rural provinces worked through a complex set of challenging ideas about the work that she was doing and how it linked to happiness.

In the villages I saw...they have big smiles, maybe they are more happy than us because in the town it is so stressful. In the town I must always have more money but in there...they share...they are so kind...they do not worry about the money...they do not worry about...umm... life, they just do what is best for today...and then they are not thinking too much about tomorrow, not thinking so much....The village is not rich about the money but it is rich, rich about the happiness, rich in their life – they have rice there, they have food there, everything is perfect for them, not thinking about work, not thinking too much.

In the course of the interview Phou questions her own stories about happiness.

it's like we always think that they have to develop just ummm...people in the town think like that about people in the country...but...ummm...but I'm not sure if they are happy or not?... yeah because maybe they are happy already in their life that they have already, yeah...maybe development is just an idea of ours and we want to push everything to them

She is thinking through these ideas as she speaks them out loud and comes to a possible conclusion that challenges the value of the job that she is doing. Although she gave no signs of discomfort the conversation may, therefore, not have been a completely comfortable experience, since the young woman was questioning her own values, beliefs and actions. This may be especially the case since earlier in the interview she had said that it was important for her happiness to have work that she thought “has meaning and is good for society” but it seems that the interview and our relationship offered a safe enough space for her to challenge her own thinking and she effusively expressed her gratitude at the end of the interview.

It seems, however, that some ways of sharing thoughts about happiness can have a negative impact and some a positive impact. San, the young volunteer discussed above who felt sad when she heard other young volunteers talking about how important their warm families were to their happiness (see page 222) may not agree that it is a good thing to think and talk about happiness. Similarly, in a conversation, Lee discussed how he used to talk with a friend about what will make them happy in the future but they have decided to stop having these conversations so often “because I see many people in Laos who they think like this they are not successful because they don't concentration on what they do now”. In his opinion, thinking and talking about future happiness can sometimes happen at the expense of present happiness.

There is, therefore, a question about the types of conversation about happiness that are positive and useful. When asked about the relevance of happiness to his work, Sam, a young male volunteer who has partial responsibility for training other young volunteers, suggested that caution was needed when talking about happiness because if one volunteer believes that only having a new motorbike or iPhone will make him happy then maybe he will persuade all of the other volunteers that this is the case when maybe there are lots of different ways to be happy. I suggest that an awareness of the concepts of both conceptual models of happiness and narrative scripts in the context of a framework of past, present and future happiness, again, offer some tentative answers to this question. In the example given

above, Lee decided to stop the conversations that he was having about happiness because the focus of the conversations upon future happiness were impinging (or he saw the potential for them to impinge) upon his present happiness. All of the interactions that I had with Lee during the research process indicate a strong commitment to the happiness scripts “the way to be happy is to be a good Lao person” and “I will be happy if I follow my heart”. Another relevant detail in this story is that he is a novice monk and, although I do not want to suggest that all the novice monks necessarily follow these two scripts, he vocalised a strong commitment to Buddhism and to his *wat*. These two scripts do at times clash and, not uncommonly, this particular young man believes strongly in the importance of family but has left his family in order to pursue his dreams both for a broad high education and specifically to study the dharma. However, what both of these scripts have in common is a emphasis upon present happiness over future happiness and a scepticism of the consumerist attitude of looking for happiness in external things to be acquired that is central to the happiness script “I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life”. The conversations about happiness that Lee was having with other novice monks in the temple were tempting him into this latter script and he made a decision not to continue to engage in these conversations and therefore, at least in this instance, not to follow this script.

Lee is a young man whose role as a novice monk and whose personal commitment to a meditation practice suggest that he already has opportunities to pay attention to his subjective experience and his decision to stop the conversations that were impacting on the present happiness that he wishes to prioritise demonstrates the focused and mindful thinking that Sombath advocates above. This mirrors the evidence reviewed by Kesebir and Diener that:

Whereas being self-conscious and obsessive about one’s happiness may backfire, there are still certain activities individuals can consciously choose to partake or lifestyle changes that they can deliberately make that will increase their happiness such as meditation and counting one’s blessings. (2008:120)

I suggest that it is possible and important to create positive and useful spaces to reflect upon happiness which avoid subscribing to a particular happiness model or script and instead to provide opportunities to become aware that the stories that they tell themselves and others about happiness are only stories that can be challenged. However, more research is necessary to look at what exactly these spaces might look like in order to avoid an obsessive focus on happiness that may be self-defeating.

Conclusion

This chapter examines the implications of the socially constructed nature of the three happiness scripts woven from varying combinations of the conceptual models of happiness, the things that young volunteers think are most important for their happiness and the normative beliefs that they hold about what they should do in order to be happy. The scripts offer a framework by which to identify the beliefs that research participants share about happiness but they necessarily simplify the complexities of young volunteers' lives which don't necessarily live up to the happiness scripts that they follow, resulting in unhappiness or suffering. In their everyday lives the ways that young volunteers understand happiness are messy and plural; sometimes the scripts overlap and can get confused, or young volunteers may follow multiple scripts simultaneously, either in different life domains or in the same domain at different points in time.

The current research identifies both that young volunteers want to be happy and they want to become more aware of their own beliefs about happiness, with an unexpected research finding being that participants felt that participating in the research and considering their own opinions about happiness was beneficial to their happiness. I argue that it is vitally important to examine openly the socially constructed happiness scripts at both the individual and policy level. At a policy level care to examine and remain critical of which happiness script is being promoted through any particular policy and why this particular script has been emphasised. I suggest that one possible policy direction would be to

promote the creation of opportunities for people to reflect upon and become able to make mindful choices about their own happiness and the scripts that they follow.

Chapter Eight: Conclusions

Introduction

This research explores the individual and shared ways that young Lao volunteers experience and understand happiness with a view to considering the implications of these findings for policy promoting happiness. The findings provide both rich data about how this specific group of young people understand happiness and theoretical insights from their perceptions of happiness which may have wider relevance. This conclusion provides an overview of these findings, returning firstly to the research questions and values and, secondly, suggesting the implications of this research for theory, policy, practice and future research.

It is worth noting here that, when planning this research, I expected in this conclusion to be drawing more distinctions within the group of young volunteers, particularly between young male and young female volunteers. I came to this research with a particular academic interest in feminist theory and research and ensured that I interviewed roughly equal numbers of male and female volunteers (28 out of 46 interviewees identified as female as listed in appendix one). However, with the small number of (albeit significant) exceptions already explored (see, for example, pages 183, 192 and 231) there were not major differences between the ways that young male and female volunteers in Vientiane experience and understand happiness. The three conceptual models of happiness and the three happiness scripts were expressed equally by both young female and male volunteers. One conversation in particular suggested that these similarities might be related to the changing world in which these young volunteers live; on a trip to a waterfall with a group of young volunteers two young women in their early teens discussed how lucky they were to live in Vientiane and get an education because it meant that they could support themselves financially and, therefore, were not under pressure to find a husband who could

support them. Later in this chapter (page 264) I discuss the possibility of future research using the framework developed in this thesis in other areas of Laos. One interesting aspect of such research may be to see if there are more differences in the ways in which young men and women view happiness in more rural areas of Laos.

Returning to the research questions and values

What do the ways that young Lao volunteers in Vientiane express happiness tell us about the ways that they conceptualise happiness?

Young volunteers found it more difficult to express the more abstract nature or form of happiness than to think about the things that make them happy. The words and metaphors that they use, therefore, offer a ‘way in’ to access the ways that research participants conceptualise happiness. Chapter Four therefore describes the key words and common metaphors that were used by young volunteers in the current research to express happiness. Following the work of Kovesces (1991), these words and metaphors that research participants use to express happiness provide an insight into the cognitive models that they have of the form that happiness takes. The current research identifies three such cognitive models commonly used by young Lao volunteers in Vientiane:

- Becoming Happy
- Being Happy
- Happy Being With Others.

These three models each represent a different understanding of the structure or form that happiness takes. As represented by the model ‘becoming happy’, happiness as an ultimate aim to be achieved at some point in the future, ‘being happy’ represents a view of happiness as an ongoing experience and a choice to be made by the individual in the present, and in the cognitive model ‘happy being with others’ happiness exists in relationships between people who care about each other and spend time together. A consideration of the relationship between happiness and time and of the place in which

happiness is located can help to clearly distinguish these conceptual understandings of happiness. The first two models are defined by their temporal understanding of happiness; in “Becoming Happiness” happiness is something that research participants aspire to be in the future whereas in ‘being happy’ happiness is a present moment experience that is within the control of the individual. These conceptual models refer primarily to individuals but do not specify whether the happiness is located inside or outside of the person who is or aspires to be happy. The third model does not specify a temporal relationship to happiness and is defined by way that it locates happiness neither inside nor outside of the individual but in the connections between people.

As described in Chapter Four, these models are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive, but provide a framework to examine the most common ways that research participants understand the form of happiness to take.

What do young Lao volunteers in Vientiane say makes them happy?

Using Feldman’s (2010) distinction between the form and the content of happiness, while the previous question focuses upon the form that research participant’s perceive happiness to take, this question explores the content of that happiness and addresses Veenhoven’s (2002) question about the things that people consider when they assess their own happiness. Following a thematic analysis of the data that was carried out in collaboration with research participants as outlined in Chapter Five, eleven themes were identified related to what young Lao volunteers in Vientiane say make them feel happy and are important for their happiness. The research also explored why research participants thought that these themes made them happy and the most prevalent answers to this question are used to organise the themes using the framework of the three conceptual models, as seen in figure 3 on page 165.

By their nature, themes distinguish between different aspects of young volunteers’ life and yet research participants rarely talked about these themes in isolation from each other. Further to this, research participants were able to identify links between all of the themes and Chapter Five examines some of the most common of these tensions between the themes

and the ways in which they interact in order to support young volunteers' happiness. Many of the tensions that arise result from the use of different conceptual models of happiness when referring to different themes, resulting in perceived tensions between present and future happiness or between individual happiness and happiness located in relationship.

What beliefs do young volunteers in Vientiane have about happiness?

Throughout this thesis I illustrate how young volunteers' beliefs about happiness are not fixed but vary over time and depending upon context. However, as I explored the links between the conceptual models used to represent the most common forms of happiness expressed by research participants and the themes that young volunteers identified about the content of their happiness, I began to see several common ways in which these models and themes were woven together to form shared stories about happiness. Drawing on Wierzbicka's (2004) theory of cultural scripts that represent the shared ways that groups of people understand emotional experience, I identified three common 'happiness scripts', each bringing together a different combination of the form and content of happiness and each underpinned by a set of shared beliefs about happiness. Each of these scripts, discussed in detail in Chapter Six, offers a narrative about a pathway that many young volunteers believe will lead to happiness.

Happiness Script One: The way to be happy is to be a good Lao person.

Underpinned by the following beliefs about happiness:

- If I follow the traditional moral rules I will be happy.
- Other people often know better than me what will make me happy.
- The individual must play their part in promoting collective happiness; their family and community being happy will make the individual happy

Happiness Script Two: I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and to have an easy life.

Underpinned by the following beliefs about happiness:

- A happy life is one that is *saduak sabai* (“convenient and comfortable”).
- The things that will make my life *saduak sabai* are external to me.
- If I had enough money I could, either directly or indirectly, buy the things that would make me happy.

Happiness Script Three: I am happy when I follow my heart.

Underpinned by the following beliefs about happiness:

- Happiness comes from what I feel inside rather than what I have outside.
- The best way for me to help other people is to do the things that make my heart happy.
- The first steps to happiness are self-awareness and mindfulness

As outlined in Chapter Six, although each of the themes are potentially relevant to all of the scripts, each script emphasises the importance of particular themes. Similarly, although the scripts do not each neatly align to one particular conceptual model of happiness, each emphasises particular aspects of the conceptual models. ‘The way to be happy is to be a good Lao person’ emphasises the location of happiness in relationships between people, thus aligning it with the conceptual model of ‘happy being with others’ and gives a normative account of how best to strengthen these bonds in order for collective happiness. ‘I will be happy if I have the things I need to be comfortable and have an easy life’ locates happiness externally to the individual in commodities that they can buy in order to make their life (and their family’s lives) easy and comfortable. This script’s primarily future focus aligns it most closely to the conceptual model of ‘becoming happy’ although this conceptual model does not necessarily imply that happiness exists outside of the individual. ‘I am happy when I follow my heart’ locates happiness firmly inside the individual and, although it is often aspirational and related to following dreams, considers self-awareness as central to happiness. This script has a present moment focus, thus aligning it most closely with the conceptual model of ‘being happy’.

The happiness scripts move the debate on from Veenhoven's (2002) question of what people are considering when they assess their happiness to the multiple ways in which people understand happiness in their day to day lives and the multiple reasons why they understand it in these ways. The scripts represent the multiple beliefs that research participants have about the form and the content of happiness. However, it is vital to emphasise that these scripts are socially constructed in response to the different social, political, cultural and religious influences in young volunteer's lives.

How do these beliefs about happiness fit with young volunteers' expressed experiences of happiness?

The happiness scripts are socially constructed by the research participants in response to the multiple influences in their lives and subsequently identified and interpreted by the researcher; they represent a framework that can be used to examine research participants' perceptions of happiness rather than any objective truth about research participants' experiences of happiness.

The current research identified two key ways in which these sets of beliefs held by research participants did not always sit easily with the day to day realities of their lives. Firstly lives did not always live up to the scripts; sometimes other people did not behave in the way that young volunteers wanted them to behave or life circumstances were such that following the script in the way that young volunteers wanted to follow it was not possible. In this circumstance some volunteers found that their perceived deviation from the script caused them suffering as they compared themselves to their peers. Others modified or switched the script that they were following in order to refocus on beliefs that fitted with their life circumstances.

The reality of the young volunteers' lives is that there are multiple conflicting influences telling them different stories about the way that they should live. Secondly, therefore, while some research participants appeared to follow one main script in the everyday lives, others simultaneously followed multiple happiness scripts in a sometimes conflicting and often

inconsistent fashion. Sometimes young volunteers followed different scripts in different areas of their lives and sometimes they appear to switch between scripts in the same domain of their life.

This is further complicated since, as discussed in Chapter Seven, the scripts overlap and are therefore not mutually exclusive. For example, a research participant may have the intention of being a dutiful child but this intention might be acted upon differently depending upon if they were following script one (they might emphasise following religious practices and adhering to social conventions) or script two (they might emphasise making as much money as possible in order to buy things to make their family's life easy and comfortable).

This interaction between beliefs about happiness and the everyday realities of research participants' lives can be messy and confusing. An unexpected finding of the current research was that participants said that taking part in the research and having opportunities to reflect upon and challenge their own beliefs about happiness with other people made them happy. One of the values underpinning this research, as outlined in Chapter Seven is the importance of finding ways that happiness can be communicated and shared between individuals and across cultures in order to affect change. Prior to conducting fieldwork I assumed that this communication of happiness would relate to the research findings, but research participants were clear that this was also a valuable aspect of the research process. This also links to another of the research values that states that research has the potential to be a positive learning experience and an opportunity for reflection for everyone involved in the process. However, this finding was not anticipated from the beginning of the research and therefore information about the impact of the research process was not collected systematically but rather emerged from field-notes and conversations. This finding therefore leads directly to one of the recommendations for further research to explore the link between happiness and collaborative reflection outlined on page 264.

Implications for theory

This research emerged from the view that development must include a consideration of peoples' subjective experiences in order to improve quality of life. I suggest that positive subjective experience that contributes to quality of life can be intuitively referred to as happiness. However, the current research demonstrates the enormous challenges related to establishing a common definition and understanding of happiness. Within one small and very specific population of young volunteers in Vientiane, Laos, three conceptual models of happiness and three common happiness scripts underpinned by different beliefs about happiness were identified. Simply put, when different people, at both every-day and academic levels, and talk about happiness we are often talking about different things. This is true even within one small population and becomes even more complex when there is a requirement to translate happiness across languages and cultures.

I argue that a distinction between the form and content of happiness (Feldman 2010) and an examination of such form and content using the theoretical concepts of time and location are useful to navigate the challenge of identifying the meanings behind the words that are being used. When related to happiness, a consideration of time enables us to identify whether the focus is upon past, present or future happiness (Ho, 2006; Simsek, 2009) and shifts the focus towards narrative accounts of happiness that are not static but rather take place across time. Location refers to whether the person locates their happiness inside themselves, in things outside themselves or in the relationships between themselves and other people (Biswas-Diener et al., 2012; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 2008).

While the conceptual models that young volunteers have about happiness and the things that they say make them happy are interesting and potentially useful for developing wellbeing indicators, they are not sufficient for a theoretical understanding of how research participants understand happiness. King and Hicks (2006) point to the idea that each person has multiple possible narratives of themselves and, building upon Wierzbicka's (2004) theory of cultural scripts, I demonstrate that research participants share common scripts

about happiness that combine these conceptual models and themes with common shared beliefs about happiness. The happiness scripts and the examination of the possible origins of these scripts in Chapter Six make the socially constructed nature of the multiple ways that people understand happiness explicit. This understanding is vital since it shifts the focus from increasing happiness to becoming aware of the happiness scripts that are being followed at both individual and social levels.

Implications for policy and practice?

Research participants in the current study want to be happy and say that happiness is important in their lives. Without exception the young volunteers who were asked in interviews said that it was important to be happy and this view was unanimously mirrored in all of the research workshops in which the question was asked. In interviews and in informal conversations the vast majority of young people said that being happy was more important than being rich and slightly more than half who were asked said that it was more important to be happy than to be successful. Of those who said that it was more important to be rich or to be successful the most common reason was a belief that being rich or being successful would ultimately lead to happiness. Therefore, if social policy aims to promote wellbeing and quality of life (Alcock et al. 2003) then it is important to consider happiness as one part of that policy.

However happiness is also a slippery concept. The current research demonstrates that even within one small group of people speaking the same language there are three common conceptual models used to represent happiness. Translating and comparing happiness across cultures and languages, as is necessary for international policy considerations, is even more challenging across languages. The three conceptual models of happiness identified in the current research as used by young Lao volunteers in Vientiane are not exhaustive; other groups or individuals are likely to have different conceptual models. They do, however, provide a potential framework, through the use of the two theoretical lenses of

time and location, for policy makers to ensure that they are talking about the same thing and comparing like with like.

Such a framework also promotes the importance of considering the whole structure of happiness in policy considerations since, in the current research, only promoting one of the conceptual models would exclude important elements of how young volunteers perceive happiness. In Chapter One I demonstrated that happiness and the closely related concept of subjective wellbeing are increasingly being considered as an end goal in social and development policy. However Soni argues that “calling happiness an ‘end’ excludes it from the process, thereby ‘reifying’ it” (2010: 126). From another perspective, a disproportionate focus upon the individual’s ability to ‘be happy’ in the present moment may result in the satisfaction that frustrated the authors of the Vientiane focused Asian Trends Monitoring Bulletin when they wrote that, despite limited income opportunities and poor government services the Lao people had “low motivation for change and a high level of complacency with their current way of life” and concluded that this was one of their most worrying findings (2013: 16).

The conceptual models are useful as a framework to identify different aspects of happiness that are important to people and to use when talking about happiness, but ultimately it is essential to consider all of the different aspects as interdependent. Loy makes this argument from a Buddhist perspective when he says that, “the theoretical academic distinctions drawn above to help conceptualise happiness essentially dissolve. Happiness is both the end goal of enlightenment and the actions that are taken towards that goal; individual action is indistinguishable from collective change in the world” (2009: 237).

Further, the happiness scripts identified in the current research demonstrate that happiness is not a politically neutral concept. While the conceptual models of happiness are purely structural, when combined with the things that research participants say make them happy and their socially constructed beliefs about happiness the result is the normative happiness scripts that tell young volunteers what they should do to be or become happy. That the ways that people understand happiness can be expressed by means of such socially

constructed scripts has implications for any policy consideration of happiness since it becomes necessary not only to identify a shared definition of happiness but also to identify which happiness script is being promoted and to be explicit about why that particular script has been chosen. As can be seen in all of the three common happiness scripts identified amongst young volunteers with NPAs in Vientiane, happiness scripts can be used to promote a particular set of political and/or religious beliefs which may or may not be made explicit. All three of the scripts identified in the current research can also be seen reflected in the existing literature media about Vientiane as outlined in Chapter Two. Script one, 'the way to be happy is to be a good Lao person' mirrors the LPRG socialist rhetoric that promotes the individual's responsibility to the collective. Script two, 'I will be happy if I have the things that I need to be comfortable and have an easy life' reflects the increasing consumerism and unequal rapid change that many commentators consider to be so negative in contemporary Vientiane. Script three, 'I am happy when I follow my heart' draws on ideas of sustainable development, one source of which is Lao civil society, and is influenced potentially by both the Buddhist dharma and self-help.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Laos is a rapidly changing country and, as argued by Larson (2002), globalisation arguable has a greater impact upon children and young people than older adults. As a result of the recent historical trajectory described (see page 51), young people in Vientiane have very different life experiences from their parents and previous generations of Lao people. Therefore it is reasonable to suggest that some of the dominant scripts about happiness held by young people might be different to those held by previous generations in Vientiane. As argued in Chapter One, children and young people are simultaneously being, belonging and becoming (Haw, 2010; Sumsion and Wong, 2011); reflecting this conceptualisation the scripts and models described in this thesis describe how young volunteers in Vientiane are simultaneously being happy, becoming happy and happy being with other people. These same young volunteers also simultaneously play important roles in both the present and the future of civil society in Laos. The happiness scripts that young volunteers choose to follow will impact upon the choices that they make in their lives and therefore the future development of civil society in Laos. However, happiness is

a political concept (see above) and an active civil society may be viewed by Lao authorities as a threat (see page 72).

I conclude therefore that open conversations about happiness need to take place in order to ensure that all important aspects of happiness are included in any policy consideration and that the beliefs about happiness inherent in any policy are transparent and critiqued. Such conversations are important at both policy and individual levels, yet they may also be challenging because they open the possibility of choosing not to follow the dominant or preferred script. It could be argued that opportunities for these conversations are particularly important for young people whose individual and collective life decisions will have significant impact upon the future of development in Laos.

Despite a perception amongst both Lao people and foreigners that Lao people are not reflective, one of the unexpected findings of this research was that young volunteers expressed gratitude for the opportunity to engage in this research and felt that they benefitted from thinking about their own happiness. Young Lao volunteers valued opportunities to examine their assumptions and beliefs about happiness, to share their ideas about happiness and begin to make conscious choices about how they want their lives to be. Johnson advocates a move away from policy that solely measures happiness to policy that opens spaces for people to consider happiness, stating “although happiness cannot be measured, and perhaps should not be measured, the space wherein people aspire towards those things that make them happy can be determined” (2004: 471). Reflecting this thinking, after watching the documentary “Happy” one research participant, Sam, commented that he enjoyed listening to people’s stories about happiness but he didn’t like the scientist who tried to measure happiness because “You can’t measure a smile...(pause)...well, it is possible but it wouldn’t have any meaning.” Since research participants in the current research state that reflecting upon their own happiness makes them happy, promoting such opportunities to consider happiness also has the potential to move policy away from a sole focus upon ‘becoming happy’ to a holistic consideration of

the full range of possible conceptual models. Appadurai (2000) suggests that imagination is the most important tool for developing a grassroots globalisation that puts people at the centre of managing and negotiating a rapidly changing and inconsistent world. An awareness of the scripts opens up the possibility of imagining new scripts and new ways of understanding happiness. Happiness is both an important experience and a slippery concept. It is both critical that we consider it and vital that we remain critical of it.

Implications for future research:

Simsek and Kocayoruk (2013) acknowledge several limitations of their research so far and give suggestions for future research including the need for more qualitative research to validate the idea that people assess their lives as a temporal whole life project and the need for research in different cultural contexts to identify whether the needs and values necessary in order to give a positive evaluation of this whole life project vary across cultures. The research upon which this thesis is based provides rich data from young volunteers living in an urban Lao cultural context and I suggest that the temporal nature of happiness can be used as a theoretical lens through which to view the current research findings.

The current research provides rich qualitative data about the beliefs that a specific group of young people hold about happiness, taking account of temporal and locational aspects of happiness. As discussed in Chapter One, such research is important in order to understand the complex ways in which people understand happiness, something that people say is important in their lives and yet which is difficult to define (e.g. Simsek and Kocayoruk, 2013). The findings and conclusions of this research relate both to this specific group of young people and to the wider theoretical and policy-related implications of the research findings that are relevant more generally.

Therefore I would suggest three foci for future research in this area:

Firstly it would be useful to use the theoretical findings of the current research as a lens through which to examine different groups' understandings and beliefs of happiness. Whilst the specificity of the current research is a strength since it enabled depth over breadth of understanding, it needs to be supported by similar studies with other groups of people. Being a volunteer with an NPA is only one part of the current research participant's lives and, although it is also true that particular types of young people will be attracted to being a volunteer, it is still plausible that elements of the current research may be relevant to a wider population of young people in Vientiane. However, as outlined in Chapter Two, young volunteer's lives are very different from the lives of the majority of Lao young people's lives since, living in Vientiane, they are likely to experience less social disadvantage, have access to a broader range of social influences and experience happiness differently (Rehbein, 2007). The findings of the current research could, therefore, be used as a starting place to explore the understandings and beliefs about happiness held by a wider group of young people in Vientiane and Laos. Further, a similar methodology of identifying conceptual models, themes and happiness scripts could be used with other groups of people in different locations.

Secondly, the current research suggests that, thus far, a consideration of happiness in development has tended to utilise a particular conceptual model of happiness that emphasises quantifying and growing happiness, with a focus upon happiness as an end goal of development. Simultaneously the research shows that socially constructed understandings of happiness are not politically neutral and demonstrates that a need for a critical awareness of normative beliefs held about happiness is vital. Future research could usefully explore alternative ways that development could consider wider understandings of happiness, including a possible shift of focus from solely measuring happiness towards open conversations that promote critical understanding of the importance of happiness in people's lives.

Thirdly, young people valued the opportunity to reflect upon their own happiness and to challenge the assumptions and beliefs that they have about happiness. One of the key

findings of the current research is the importance of opportunities for people to reflect upon and have conversations about happiness and yet participants also indicated that there are some ways of thinking and talking about happiness which are not helpful and cause suffering. Therefore, future research is necessary to explore the types of conversations and opportunities for reflection about happiness that people consider useful to support their happiness and the types of conversations and opportunities for reflection that are not useful or indeed counter-productive.

Returning to young Lao volunteers in Vientiane.

While the key findings of the current research are specific to the research participants, the implications of the research for theory and policy are broader than this specific group. However, given the values underpinning the research and the collaborative nature of the methodology it is important to end this thesis by returning the focus to this particular group of young people.

The young volunteers with NPAs in Vientiane who participated in this occupy an unusual position in a diverse and rapidly changing country, simultaneously influenced by a complex political legacy, a rapidly modernising capital city and a newly visible civil society. Laos' complex recent history and rapid globalisation means that they are also members of a Lao generation whose life circumstances are dramatically different from that of their parents and grandparents. This group of young people therefore form a fascinating and unique focus for this thesis.

One of the research values is that the research process and outcomes should be interesting, accessible and useful not only to the researcher but also to the participants. However, reflecting Appadurai's (2000) argument that there is a disconnect between academic research and the everyday experiences and needs of ordinary people living in communities, I found that the extended timescale of a PhD makes it difficult to maintain momentum and interest, particularly in the research outcomes. For the research participants it may be that

short-term outcomes only tangentially related to my research while I was in Laos (e.g. Happy Laos, a short film that I was involved in making in collaboration with a range of civil society organisations about perceptions of happiness across a wider group of Lao people and my subsequent involvement in running a workshop at the AEPF) were more important than waiting for the final findings and thesis. These opportunities came from my research but they did not ultimately feed directly into my research findings and therefore do not form part of this thesis. It may, also, be true that engagement with the research findings is difficult to maintain given the changed circumstances in civil society in Vientiane; essentially the most outspoken advocate for a consideration of happiness in Lao development is no longer available to engage with these outcomes and others related to Lao civil society are understandably reluctant to engage with ideas that may be considered controversial.

While an understanding of the form and content of happiness for young volunteers may be of use to the organisations with whom they volunteer, the unexpected finding that taking part in the research, challenging their own assumptions and sharing ideas about happiness, were valued by the young volunteers is also of relevance. The socially constructed and normative nature of the happiness scripts makes awareness of the underlying thoughts, beliefs and influences behind these subjective experiences vital. I therefore advocate, on behalf of the young volunteers who participated in the research and valued the opportunity to reflect upon their own happiness, for the need to provide opportunities for young volunteers to discuss, critique and share ideas about their positive subjective experience and about what makes life good. Making use of Appadurai's tool of the "social imagination" such a practice of opening opportunities for reflection and discussion holds potential for social transformation since imagination "is also the faculty through which collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life emerge" (2000: 6).

This is arguably increasingly important in the current civil society context in Vientiane in which these young volunteers fulfil their volunteering roles. Suggestions have been made that the disappearance of Sombath Somphone was an attempt to limit the role and

confidence of the newly emerging civil society in Laos which in the last four years has gained prominence (Arnst 2014; Davidson, 2014). In its reflection upon AEPF9, the AEPF website states that there is, in the light of Somphone's abduction, "an increasing perception that the 'spaces' for dialogue, discussion and debate on how to achieve more sustainable economic and social development in Laos are becoming constricted"⁵⁶. Although not necessarily easy or comfortable in the current political context, providing reflective spaces for young volunteers to think critically about happiness including about the whole range of influences in their lives that shape their subjective experiences would be particularly valuable. Such spaces could offer opportunities to become aware of and challenge the happiness script(s) that they currently follow and make mindful choices about which script(s) are useful in their lives.

⁵⁶See: <http://www.aepf.info/aepf9/99-aepf9-reflections-and-lesson-learning> (Accessed: 9th July 2014)

Reference List

- Abdallah, S., Thompson, S., Michaelson, J., Marks, N. and Steuer, N. (2009). "The (un)Happy Planet Index 2.0: Why good lives don't have to cost the Earth." New Economic Foundation.
http://base.socioeco.org/docs/the_happy_planet_index_2.0_1.pdf (Accessed: 11th August 2014).
- Ableson, R. (1981) "Psychological Status of the Script Concept." *American Psychologist*, 36(7) 715-729.
- Abu-Lughod, L. (1991) "Writing Against Culture." in Fox, R. (1991) *Recapturing Anthropology*. Santa Fe: SAR Press.
- Alcock, P. (1998) 'What is social policy?' in Alcock, P., et al.
(1998) *Student's companion to social policy* Malden, MA:
Blackwell
- Angel, L. (1994) *Enlightenment East and West*. New York: University of New York Press.
- Appadurai, A. (2000) "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination." *Public Culture*, 12 (1) 1-19 (available at:
<file:///C:/Users/Christina/Downloads/Appadurai%20%20grassroots%20globalisation%20and%20the%20research%20imagination.pdf> (Accessed: 25th June 2014)
- Arnett, J. (2002) "The Psychology of Globalisation." *American Psychologist* 57(10) 774-783.
- Arnst, R. (2014) "The decline of Lao civil society." *New Mandala*,
<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2014/06/15/the-decline-of-lao-civil-society/> (Accessed: 30th June 2014).
- Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2011) 'Civil Society Briefs: Lao People's Democratic Republic' available at: <http://www.adb.org/publications/civil-society-briefs-lao-peoples-democratic-republic> (Accessed: 11th July 2014)
- Asian Trends Monitoring Bulletin (2012) "Vientiane: Poor but different." Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.
- Askew, M., Logan, W. and Long, C. (2006) *Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao landscape*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Atkinson, P. and Hammersley, M. (1994) "Ethnography and Participant Observation" in .
Atkinson, P. et al. (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Ltd.

- Balen, R., Blyth, E., Calabretto, H., Fraser, C., Horrocks, C. and Manby, M. (2006) "Involving Children in Health and Social Research." *Childhood*, 13(1) 29-48.
- Ben-Arieh, A., Kaufman, N., Andrews, A., George, R., Lee, B. and Aber, L. (2001) *Measuring and Monitoring Children's Well-Being*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- Bhikku, T. and Degraaf, G (translated) (2012) *Udana: Exclamations*. <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/udana.pdf> (Accessed: 26th June 2014)
- Biswas-Diener, R., Tay, L. and Diener, E. (2012) 'Happiness in India.' in Selin, H. and Davey, G. (ed.) *Happiness Across Cultures: Views of Happiness and Quality of Life in Non-Western Cultures*. New York: Springer.
- Borchgrevink, A. (2003). "Silencing language: Of anthropologists and interpreters." *Ethnography* 4(1) 95-121.
- Borgonovi, F. (2008) "Doing well by doing good. The relationship between formal volunteering and self-reported health and happiness." *Social Science & Medicine*, 66(11) 2321-2334.
- Buckingham, W. (2012) *Introducing Happiness: A Practical Guide*, London: Icon Books Ltd.
- Camfield, L., Crivello, G., Woodhead, M. (2009) "Wellbeing Research in Developing Countries: Reviewing the Role of Qualitative Methods." *Social Indicators Research*, 90, 5-31.
- Camfield, L. and Ruta, D. (2007) "'Translation is not enough': using the Global Person Generated Index (GPGI) to assess individual quality of life in Bangladesh, Thailand, and Ethiopia." *Quality of Life Research* 16(6) 1039-1051.
- Canda, E. and Phaobtong, T. (1992) "Buddhism as a Support System for Southeast Asian Refugees." *Social Work*, 37(1) 61-67.
- Case, W. (2011) "Laos in 2010: Political Stasis, Rabid Development, and Regional Counter-weighting." *Asian Survey*, 51(1) 202-207.
- Clark (2014) "Laos: Crony scheme in control of press and civil society." *Index: the voice of free expression*, <http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2014/05/laos-crony-scheme-control-press-civil-society/> (Accessed: 30th June 2014)
- Cleaver, F. (2001) "Institutions, Agency and the Limitations of Participatory Approaches to Development." in Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (eds.) *Participation: The New Tyranny?* London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Clifford, J. (1983) "On Ethnographic Authority." *Representations*, 2, 118-146.
- Cole, J. and D. Durham (2008). "Globalization and the Temporality of Children and Youth." in Cole, J. and Durham, D. (eds.) *Figuring the Future: Globalization and*

- the Temporalities of Children and Youth* Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press.
- Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (2001) *Participation: The New Tyranny?* London: Zed Books.
- Cooper, R. (2008) *Culture Shock! A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette: Laos*. New York: Marshall Cavendish International.
- Cote, J. (2000) *Arrested Adulthood: The Changing Nature of Maturity and Identity*. London: New York University Press.
- Crivello, G., Camfield, L. and Woodhead, M. (2009) "How Can Children Tell Us About Their Wellbeing? Exploring the Potential of Participatory Research Approaches within Young Lives." *Social Indicators Research*, 90, 51-72.
- Davidson, H. (2014) "Vanished: Laotian development worker still missing after more than a year." *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/11/gone-without-trace-laotian-society-leader-still-missing-after-two-years#start-of-comments> (Accessed: 30th June 2014).
- Diener, E., Oishi, S. and Lucas, R. (2003) "Personality, Culture and Subjective Wellbeing : Emotional and Cognitive Evaluations of Life" *Annual Review of Psychology*, 54, 403-425.
- Diener, E. and Suh, E. (2003) *Culture and Subjective Well-being*, Cambridge MA; MIT Press.
- Duangpanya (unpublished) "Youth volunteer work at Donkoi Children's Development Center (DCDC) in Vientiane, Lao PDR: A Phenomenological Study." *MSc. dissertation, Asian Social Institute, Manila, Philippines*.
- Duc, L.T., Ngoc, N. P., Chau, T. M., Tien, N. V. and Son , V. T. (2008) "Young Lives: Vietnam Round 2 Survey" *Young Lives*, Department of International Development, University of Oxford. http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/pdf/outputs/younglives/vnm-country-report_2.pdf (Accessed: 10th July 2014).
- Eckersley, R., Wierenga, A. and Wyn, J. (2005) "Flashpoints & Signposts: Pathways to success and wellbeing for Australia's young people." Mental Health and Wellbeing Unit: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/~media/ProgramsandProjects/Publications/Attachments/Flashpoints_and_Signposts_report.ashx (Accessed: 23th June 2014).
- Economist, The (2013) "The future of Laos: a bleak landscape." <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21588421-secretive-ruling-clique-and-murky-land-grabs-spell-trouble-poor-country-bleak-landscape> (Accessed: 11th July 2014).
- Edmond, R. (2009). "I Am All about the Future World: Cambodian Children's Views on Their Status as Orphans." *Children and Society*, 23, 407-417.

- Ekman, P., Davidson, R., Ricard, M. and Wallace, B. (2005) "Buddhist and Psychological Perspectives on Emotions and Well-Being" *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14 (2) 59-63.
- Enfield, N. J. (2010). "Language and Culture in Lao PDR: An Agenda for Research." *The Journal of Lao Studies* 1(1)
<http://www.laostudies.org/system/files/subscription/JLS-v1-i1-Jan2010-enfield.pdf>
 (Accessed: 11th August 2014).
- Etherington, K. (2007) "Ethical Research in Reflexive Relationships." *Qualitative Inquiry* 13, 599-615.
- Evans, G. (1998) *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Evans, G. (1999) "Intro: What is Lao Culture and Society?" in Evans, G. (ed.) *Laos: Culture and Society*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Fass, P. S. (2003) "Children and Globalization." *Journal of Social History*, 36(4) 963-977.
- Feldman, F. (2010) *What is this thing called Happiness?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gallacher, L.-A. and M. Gallagher (2008). "Methodological Immaturity in Childhood Research?: Thinking through 'participatory methods'." *Childhood* 15 (4) 499-516.
- Geertz, C. (2001) *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*. Princetown: Princetown University Press.
- Gender Development Group (unpublished) "Women in Migration: Research in Vientiane Capital and Khammouane Province, Lao PDR"
- Gerson, K. and Horowitz, R. (2002) "Observation and Interviewing: Options and choices in qualitative research" in May, T. (ed.) *Qualitative Research in Action* (2002)
 London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Giddens, A. (1999) *Runaway World*. London: Profile Books Ltd.
- Gotz, G. and Simone, A. (2003) "Belonging and Becoming in African Cities" in Bremner, L. and Mangcu, X. (eds.) *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on the Postapartheid City*. New York: Routledge.
- Griffin, J. (2007) "What do Happiness Studies Study?" *Journal of Happiness Studies* 8 (1) 139-148.
- Grindoz, A.S. (2013) "The Land Should Feed the People First." *Thomson Reuters Foundation*. <http://www.trust.org/item/20130912154401-6xc1d/> (Accessed: 6th. July 2014).
- Guba, E. and Y. Lincoln (1994) "Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research." In Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

- Guillemin, M. and L. Gillam (2004) "Ethics, Reflexivity, and 'Ethically Important Moments' in Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 10(2) 261-280.
- Hall, J. (2013) "From Capabilities to Contentment: Testing the links between Human Development and Life Satisfaction" in Helliwell, J. et al. (eds.) *World Happiness Report 2013*
http://unsdsn.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/02/WorldHappinessReport2013_online.pdf (Accessed 28th. June 2014).
- Haw, K. (2010) "Being, Becoming and Belonging: Young Muslim Women in Contemporary Britain" *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 31 (4) 345-361.
- Heider, K. (1991) *Landscapes of emotion: Mapping three cultures on emotion in Indonesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Helliwell, J., Layard, R. and Sachs, J. (eds.) (2013) *World Happiness Report 2013*
http://unsdsn.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/02/WorldHappinessReport2013_online.pdf (Accessed 28th June 2014).
- Henderson, S., Holland, J., McGrellis, S., Sharpe, S. and Thomson, R. (2007) *Inventing adulthoods; a biographical approach to youth transitions*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Heron, J. (1996) *Co-operative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Heron, J. and P. Reason (1997) "A Participatory Inquiry Paradigm." *Qualitative Inquiry* 3(3) 274-294.
- High, H. (2006) "'Join Together, Work Together, for the Common Good—Solidarity': Village Formation Processes in the Rural South of Laos." *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 21(1) 22-45.
- Hill, M., Davis, J., Prout, A. and Tisdall, K. (2004) "Moving the Participation Agenda Forward." *Children and Society*, 18, 77-96.
- Ho, D.Y. (1976) "On the Concept of Face." *American Journal of Sociology*, 81(4) 867-884.
- Ho, L. S. (2006) "Happiness and Social Policy"
<http://www.ln.edu.hk/econ/staff/HappinessandPublicPolicy.pdf> (Accessed: 10th August 2014).
- Humphries, B. and Martin, M. (2000) "Disrupting Ethics in Social Research." In Humphries, B. (ed.) *Social Care and Social Welfare: Issues and Debates for Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd.
- Indavong, V. (2009) 'The Lao American Diaspora and its Changing Relations with the Ethnic Homeland' available at:
https://etd.ohiolink.edu/rws_etd/document/get/ohiou1248808797/inline (Accessed: 30th June 2014).

- International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) (2012) “Country Technical Notes on Indigenous Peoples’ Issues: Lao People’s Democratic Republic” available at: <http://www.ifad.org/english/indigenous/pub/documents/tnotes/laos.pdf> (Accessed: 30th June 2014).
- Jackson, M. (2007) *Excursions*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- James, A. and Prout, A. (1997) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociology of childhood*. London: Routledge.
- James, A., Jenks, C. and Prout, A. (1998) *Theorizing Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jerndal, R. and Rigg, J. (1998) “Making space in Laos: constructing a national identity in a ‘forgotten’ country.” *Political Geography*, 17(7) 809-831.
- Johnson, J. (2004) “Development as Freedom, Freedom as Happiness: Human Development and Happiness in Bhutan” paper given at *The First International Conference on GNH*. Available at: www.bhutanstudies.org.bt (Accessed: 11th August 2014).
- Jongudomkarn, D. and Camfield, L. (2005) “Exploring the Quality of Life of People in North Eastern and Southern Thailand” *ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries*, <http://eldis.org/vfile/upload/1/document/0708/DOC19745.pdf> (Accessed: 11th August 2014).
- Kapborg, I. and Berterö, C. (2002) “Using an interpreter in qualitative interviews: does it threaten validity?” *Nursing Inquiry*, 9, 52–56.
- Kasser, T. (2006) “Materialism and its Alternatives.” in Csikszentmihalyi, M. and Csikszentmihalyi, I. *A Life Worth Living: Contributions to Positive Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Katz, C. (2004) *Growing Up Global; Economic Restructuring and Children's Everyday Lives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kesebir, P. and Diener, E. (2008) “In Pursuit of Happiness: Empirical Answers to Philosophical Questions” *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3(2) 117-125 http://internal.psychology.illinois.edu/~ediener/Documents/Kesebir-Diener_2008.pdf (Accessed: 11th August 2014).
- King, L. and Broyles, S. (1997) “Wishes, Gender, Personality and Well-Being.” *Journal of Personality*, 65(1) 49-76.
- King, L. and Hicks, J. (2006) “Narrating the Self in the Past and the Future: Implications for Maturity.” *Research in Human Development*, 3(2-3) 121 – 138.
- King, L. and Napa, C. (1998) “What Makes a Life Good?” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(1) 156-165.

- King, E. and van de Walle, E. (2010) "Laos: Ethno-linguistic Diversity and Disadvantage." in Hall, G. and Patrinos, H. (eds.) *Indigenous Peoples, Poverty and Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available at: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTINDPEOPLE/Resources/407801-1271860301656/Chapter_7_Laos.pdf (Accessed: 30th. June 2014).
- Kitayama, S. and Markus, H. (2000) "The Pursuit of Happiness and the Realization of Sympathy; Cultural Patterns of Self, Social Relations, and Well-being." in Diener, E. and Suh, E. (eds.) *Culture and Subjective Well-being*. London: The MIT Press.
- Kothari (2001) "Power, Knowledge and Social Control in Participatory Development." in Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (eds.) *Participation: The New Tyranny*, London: Zed Books.
- Kovecses, Z. (1991) "Happiness: A Definitional Effort" *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 6 (1) 29-46.
- Kunze, G. (2010) "New Decree Opens Way for Civil Society in Laos" *The Asia Foundation*, available at <http://asiafoundation.org/in-asia/2010/06/02/new-decree-opens-way-for-civil-society-in-laos/> (Accessed: 5th July 2014).
- Kvale, S. (1996) *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: SAGE Publication Ltd.
- Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. and Kovecses, Z. (1987) "The cognitive model of anger inherent in American English." in Holland, D. and Quinn, N. (eds.) *Cultural Models in Language & Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lane, R. (2000) *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Langlois, A. and Anderson, D. (2002) "Resolving the Quality of Life/Well-being Puzzle: Toward a New Model." *Canadian Journal of Regional Science*, 25 (3) 501-512.
- Larson, R. (2002) "Globalization, Societal Change, and New Technologies: What They Mean for the Future of Adolescence." *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 12(1) 1-30.
- Lassiter, L. (2005) *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lather, P. (1986) "Issues of Validity in Openly Ideological Research: Between a Rock and a Soft Place." *Interchange*, 17(4) 63-84.

- Lawrence, S. (2009) 'The Nam Theun 2 Controversy and Its Lessons for Laos' in Molle, F., Foran, T. and Kakonen, M. (ed.) *Contested Waterscapes in the Mekong Region: Hydropower, Livelihoods and Governance*, London: Earthscan.
- Loy, D. (2009) "The Karma of the Rings: A myth for modern Buddhism?" in Watts, J. (ed.) *Rethinking Karma: The Dharma of Social Justice*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Luks, A. (1988) "Helper's high: Volunteering makes people feel good, physically and emotionally. And like 'runner's calm,' it's probably good for your health." *Psychology Today*, 22(10) 34–42.
- McCormack, C. (2004) "Storying stories: a narrative approach to in-depth interview conversations." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 7(3) 219–236.
- McMellon, C. (2013) "Learning the Scripts: An exploration of the shared ways in which young Lao volunteers in Vientiane understand happiness" *Health, Culture and Society* 5 (1) <http://hcs.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/hcs/article/view/135/165> (Accessed: 11th August 2014).
- McMellon, C. (unpublished). "Caught between two worlds? Young people's subjective wellbeing in Luang Prabang, Laos." *MSc Dissertation, University of Edinburgh*.
- Meng, H. (2008) "Social Script Theory and Cross-Cultural Communication." *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 17(1) 132–138.
- Mills, M.B. (1997) "Contesting the margins of modernity: women, migration, and consumption in Thailand." *American Ethnologist*, 24(1) 37–61.
- Mortensen, C. (2014) "Kidnapping in Laos Affects Civil Society", *Eugene Weekly*, <http://www.eugeneweekly.com/20140417/news-briefs/kidnapping-laos-affects-civil-society> (Accessed: 30th June 2014).
- New Economics Foundation (NEF) (2012) "The Happy Planet Index: 2012 Report. A global index of sustainable well-being' available at: <http://www.happyplanetindex.org/assets/happy-planet-index-report.pdf> (Accessed: 30th June 2014).
- Ng, S. (1991) "Social development in the Lao P.D.R: problems and Prospects", in Zasloff and Unger (eds.) *Laos: Beyond the Revolution*, London: MacMillan.
- Ngaosyvathn, M. (1990) "Individual Soul, National Identity: The 'Baci-Sou Khuan' of the Lao." *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 5(2) 283–307.
- Nisbett, R. and T. Wilson (1977) "Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes." *Psychological Review* 84(3) 231–259.
- Nitnitiphut, K. (2007). "The Concept of Happiness: The Bridge between Western and Eastern Thought, and Empirical Evidence of Bangkokian's Happiness Determinants." *3rd International Conference on Gross National Happiness, Nongkhai/Bangkok*,

- <http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/publicationFiles/ConferenceProceedings/3rdGNH/21.3rdGNH.pdf> (Accessed: 11th august 2014).
- Nussbaum, M. (2001) *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. (2004) "Mill between Aristotle and Bentham" *Daedalus*, 133(2) 60-68.
- Nussbaum, M. (2011) *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. London: Belknap Press.
- Oishi, S., Graham, J., Kesebir, S. and Galinha, I. (2013) "Concepts of Happiness Across Time and Cultures" *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 39(5) 559-577.
- Ost, D. (2005) *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Post-Communist Europe*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Pais, J. M. (2003). "The Multiple Faces of the Future in the Labyrinth of Life." *Journal of Youth Studies* 6(2) 115-126.
- Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC) (2008) "Ten Years in Balance." available at: http://sombathdotorg.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/padetc_10_years.pdf (Accessed: 30th June 2014).
- Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC) (2009) "Liveable Laos." available at: http://www.padetc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/liveable_web.pdf (Accessed: 30th June 2014).
- Pham C. D. (2004) "Economic Reforms in a Transition Country - The Recurring Experience of Laos." *Juth Pakai*, 3 https://www.academia.edu/2701518/Language_of_Instruction_Economic_Analysis_of_the_Use_of_Minority_Languages_for_Early_Education (Accessed: 11th August 2014).
- Phimmachanh, P. (2009) "Harvesting happiness is Agriculture extension contributing to well-being happiness of poor people in communities of Houn district, Oudomxay province, Lao PDR." available at http://lad.nafri.org.la/show_record.php?mfn=1810.
- Pholsena, V. (2002) "Nation/Representation: Ethnic Classification and Mapping Nationhood in Contemporary Laos." *Asian Ethnicity*, 3(2) 175-197.
- Pholsena, V. (2006) *Post-war Laos: The Politics of Culture, History, and Identity*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- Pholsena, V. (2012) "The (Transformative) Impacts of the Vietnam War and the Communist Revolution in a Border Region in Southeastern Laos." *War & Society*, 31(2) 163-183.

- Pholsena, V. and Banomyong, R. (2007) *Laos: From Buffer State to Crossroads*. Chiang Mai, Mekong Press.
- Piker, S. (1968) "Sources of Stability and Instability in Rural Thai Society" *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 27(4) 777-790.
- Pitchforth, E. and E. van-Teijlingen (2005) "International public health research involving interpreters: a case study from Bangladesh." *BMC Public Health* 5(71) <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/5/71> (Accessed: 11th August 2014). .
- Pittman, K., Diversi, M. and Ferber, T. (2002) "Social Policy Supports for Adolescence in the Twenty-First Century: Framing Questions." *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 12 (1) 149-159.
- Post, S. (2005) "Altruism, Happiness, and Health: It's Good to Be Good." *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 12(2) 66-77.
- Prayukvong, W. (2007) 'A Buddhist Economic Approach to Employee Volunteer Program: Happiness in the workplace' *International Conference on Happiness and Public Policy, Bangkok, Thailand*. http://www.happysociety.org/ppdoconference/session_papers/session16/session16_wanna.pdf (Accessed: 6th July 2014)
- Prout, A. (2005) *The Future of Childhood*. Abingdon: Routledge Falmer.
- Pyrch, T. and M. T. Castillo (2001) "The Sights and Sounds of Indigenous Knowledge." in Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (eds.) *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Raibley, J. (2012) "Happiness is not Well-Being" *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 13(6) 1105-1129.
- Ratanakul, P. (2007) "The Dynamics of Tradition and Change in Theravada Buddhism." *The Journal of Religion and Culture*, 1 (1) 233-257.
- Ray, D. (2003). "Aspirations, Poverty and Economic Change." Available at: <http://www.econ.nyu.edu/user/debraj/Papers/povasp01.pdf> (Accessed: 10th August 2014)
- Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (2001) "Introduction: Inquiry and Participation in Search of a World Worthy of Human Aspiration." in Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (eds.) *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Reason, P. and Rowan, J. (eds.) (1985) *Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.
- Rehbein, B. (2005) "Configurations of Globalisation in Laos and Cambodia: Does Faster Globalisation Mean Better Development?" available at <http://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/3507/TS%20Pa%20Rehbein.pdf?sequence=2> (Accessed: 11th August 2014).

- Rehbein, B. (2007) *Globalization, Culture and Society in Laos*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Renold, E., Holland, S., Ross, N. and Hilma, A. (2008). "'Becoming Participant': Problematizing 'Informed consent' in Participatory Research with Young People in Care." *Qualitative Social Work*, 7(4) 427-447.
- Rigg, J. (2007) "Moving Lives: Migration and Livelihoods in the Lao PDR." *Population, Space and Place*, 13, 163-178.
- Rinzin, C., Vermeulen, W. and Glasbergen, P. (2006). "Public Perceptions of Bhutan's Approach to Sustainable Development in Practice." *Sustainable Development*, 15(1) 52-68.
- Rojas, M. (2004) "Well-being and the complexity of poverty: A subjective well-being approach."
<https://www.econstor.eu/dspace/bitstream/10419/63558/1/39151282X.pdf>
 (Accessed: 10th August 2014).
- Royo, M. G. and Velazco, J. (2006) "Exploring the Relationship Between Happiness, Objective and Subjective Well-being: Evidence from Rural Thailand." *ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries*,
<http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/workingpaperpdf/wed16.pdf> (Accessed: 11th August 2014).
- Russell, J. (1989) "Culture, scripts, and children's understanding of emotion." in Saarni, C. and Harris, P. (eds.) *Children's Understanding of Emotions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ryan, R. and Deci, E. (2000) "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions." *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25, 54-67.
<http://mmrg.pbworks.com/f/Ryan,+Deci+00.pdf> (Accessed: 11th August 2014).
- Ryan, R., Huta, V. and Deci, E. (2008) "Living Well: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective on Eudaimonia." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 9(1) 139-170.
- Savage, J. (2000) "Participative Observation: Standing in the Shoes of Others." *Qualitative Health Research*, 10(3) 324-339.
- Schimmel, J. (2009) "Development as Happiness: The Subjective Perception of Happiness and UNDP's Analysis of Poverty, Wealth and Development." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 10 (1) 93-111.
- Schlegal, A. (2000) "The Global Spread of Adolescent Culture." in Crockett, L. and Silbereisen, R. (eds.) *Negotiating Adolescence in Times of Social Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schulz, R., Schroeder, D. and Brody, C. (1997) "Collaborative narrative inquiry: fidelity and the ethics of caring in teacher research." *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 10(4) 473-485.

- Schwartz, B. (2005). *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*. London: Harper Collins.
- Scott, J. (2011) *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Seligman, M. and Pawelski, J. (2003) "Positive Psychology: FAQs" *Psychological Inquiry*, 14(2) 159-163.
- Selin, H. and Davey, G. (eds.) (2012) *Happiness Across Cultures: Views of Happiness and Quality of Life in Non-Western Cultures*, London: Springer.
- Sen, A. (1999) *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sen, A. (2000). "A Decade of Human Development." *Journal of Human Development* 1(1) 17-23.
- Sims, K. (2013) "The Case of Sombath Somphone." *New Mandala*, <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2013/10/02/the-case-of-sombath-somphone/> (Accessed: 30th. June 2014).
- Sims, K. (2014) "The Disappeared." *Southeast Asia Globe*, <http://sea-globe.com/the-disappeared-sombathsomphone/> (Accessed: 6. July 2014).
- Simsek, O. (2009) "Happiness Revisited: Ontological Well-Being as a Theory-Based Construct of Subjective Well-Being" *Journal of Happiness Studies* 10(5) 505-522.
- Simsek, O. and Kocayoruk (2013) "Affective Reactions to One's Whole Life: Preliminary Development and Validation of the Ontological Well-Being Scale" *Journal of Happiness Studies* 14(1) 309-343.
- Sisaleumsak (2012) "Modernity for Young Rural Migrant Women Working in Garment Factories in Vientiane." available as part of the LaoFAB online repository at: <http://www.LaoFAB.org/document/view/2283> (Accessed: 11th July 2014).
- Skelton, T. (2008) "Research with children and young people: exploring the tensions between ethics, competence and participation." *Children's Geographies* 6(1) 21-36.
- Soni, V. (2010) *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Stiglitz, J., Sen, A. and Fitoussi, J. (2009) "Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress" http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/documents/rapport_anglais.pdf (Accessed: 11th August 2014).
- Stuart-Fox, M. (1996) *Buddhist kingdom, Marxist state: the making of modern Laos*. Michigan: White Lotus Press.
- Sumsion, J. and Wong, S. (2011) "Interrogating 'Belonging' in Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia" *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 12(1) 28-45.

- Swaris, N. (2009) "Karma: the Creative Life Force of Human Beings." in Watts, J. (ed.) *Rethinking Karma: The Dharma of Social Justice*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Tacchi, J., Slater, D. and Lewis, P. (2003) "Evaluating Community Based Media Initiatives: An Ethnographic Action Research Approach." available at http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/files/15731/10843655801Evaluating_Community_based_media_initiatives.pdf/Evaluating+Community+based+media+initiatives.pdf (Accessed: 11th August 2014).
- Temple, B. (2002) "Crossed Wires: Interpreters, Translators, and Bilingual Workers in Cross-Language Research." *Qualitative Health Research* 12, 844-854.
- Thalemann, A. (1997) "Laos: Between battlefield and marketplace." *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 27(1) 85-105.
- The Asia Foundation (2010) "New Decree Opens Way for Civil Society in Laos" <http://asiafoundation.org/in-asia/2010/06/02/new-decree-opens-way-for-civil-society-in-laos/> (Accessed: 10th August 2014).
- Tisdall, K., J. Davis, et al. (2009) *Researching with Children and Young People: Research Design, Methods and Analysis*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Tisdall, K. and Punch, S. (2012) "Not so 'new'? Looking critically at childhood studies." *Children's Geographies* 10(3) 249-264.
- Triandis, H. C. (2000) "Cultural Syndromes and Subjective Well-being." In Diener, E. and Suh, E. (eds.) *Culture and Subjective Well-being*. London: MIT Press.
- Torras, M. (2008) "The Subjectivity Inherent in Objective Measures of Well-Being." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 9(4) 475-487.
- UNDP (2010) "Human Development Report 2010. The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development." <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-report-2010> (Accessed: 10th August 2014).
- United Nations General Assembly (2011) "Resolution 65/309 Happiness: Towards a holistic View of Development." <http://www5.cao.go.jp/keizai2/koufukudo/shiryou/5shiryou/s-1.pdf> (Accessed: 10th August 2014).
- UNICEF (2007) "Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries" *Innocenti Research Centre, Florence*. http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf (Accessed: 11th August 2014).
- United Nations Volunteers (UNV) (2002) "Status of Volunteerism in the Lao PDR: Report of Measuring Volunteering Survey Lao PDR July 2002." http://www.worldvolunteerweb.org/fileadmin/docs/old/pdf/2002/02_07_01LAO_StatusofVolunteerism_MeasuringVolunteering.pdf (Accessed: 10th August 2014).
- Veenhoven, R. (2002) "Why Social Policy Needs Subjective Indicators." *Social Indicators Research* 58, 33-45.

- Veenhoven, R. (2008) "Sociological Theories of Subjective Well-being." in Larsen, M. (ed.) *The Science of Subjective Well-Being*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Veenhoven, R. (2012) "Cross-national differences in happiness: Cultural measurement bias or effect of culture?" *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 2(4) 233-253.
- Waterman, A., Schwartz, S. and Conti, R. (2008) "The implications of two conceptions of happiness (hedonic pleasure and eudaimonia) for the understanding of intrinsic motivation" *Journal of Happiness Studies* 9, 41-79.
- Watts, J. (2009) "Karma for everyone: Social justice and the problem of re-ethicizing karma in Theravada Buddhist societies" in Watts, J. (ed.) *Rethinking Karma: The Dharma of Social Justice*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- WFP (2007) "Lao PDR: Comprehensive Food Security & Vulnerability Analysis." available at <http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp178397.pdf> (Accessed: 11th August 2014).
- Wienand, I. (2009) "Discourses on happiness: A reading of Descartes and Nietzsche" *Ethical Perspectives*, 16(1) 103-128.
- Wierzbicka, A. (2003) "Emotion and Culture: Arguing with Martha Nussbaum" *Ethos* 31 (4) 577-600.
- Wierzbicka, A. (2004) "'Happiness' in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspective." *Daedalus* 133 (2) 34-43.
- Wilson, T. and Gilbert, D. (2005) "Affective forecasting: Knowing what to want." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14(3) 131-134.
- Wolcott, H. (1990) "Making a Study 'More Ethnographic'." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 19(1) 44-72.
- Wolcott, H. (1999) *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*. Oxford: Altamira Press.
- Young, J. (2007) *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Appendix One: List of Interviewees

Number	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Expressed Ethnicity	Religion
1	New	18	F	Lao Loum	Buddhist
2	Maly	21	F	LL	Buddhist
3	Som	23	M	LL	Buddhist
4	Bout	24	M	LL	Buddhist
5	Nong	25	F	LL	Buddhist
6	Bee	26	F	LL	Buddhist
7	Song	20	M	LL	Buddhist
8	Touy	25	F	LL	Catholic
9	Lee	16	M	Kamu	Buddhist
10	Tik	23	M	LL	Buddhist
11	Souk	18	F	LL	Buddhist
12	Thang	15	F	LL	Buddhist
13	Phet	19	F	LL	Buddhist
14	Lay	16	F	LL	Buddhist
15	Net	21	M	Lao	Buddhist
16	Sam	25	M	Kamu	Buddhist
17	Toon	23	F	LL	Buddhist
18	Phou	21	F	LL	Buddhist
19	Bee	20	F	LL	Buddhist
20	Boy	21	M	LL	Buddhist
21	Kith	19	M	Lao	Buddhist
22	Sak	26	M	Lao	Buddhist
23	Mou	22	M	LL	Buddhist
24	Pith	24	M	LL	Buddhist
25	Noot	18	F	LL	Buddhist
26	Tuny	19	F	LL	Buddhist
27	San	16	F	LL	Buddhist
28	Hong	25	F	LL	Buddhist
29	Tey	24	F	LL	Buddhist
30	Ann	26	F	LL	Buddhist
31	Bui	26	F	LL	Buddhist
32	Pu	16	F	LL	Buddhist
33	Mee	18	M	LL	Buddhist

34	Noy	19	F	LL	Buddhist
35	Nok	20	F	LL	Buddhist
36	Loun	18	F	LL	Buddhist
37	Alee	18	F	Lao	Buddhist
38	Vieng	23	F	LL	Buddhist
39	Ting	16	M	Lao	Buddhist
40	Vanna	12	F	LL	Buddhist
41	Day	25	F	LL	Buddhist
42	Yod	16	M	LL	Buddhist
43	Nalee	27	F	LL	Christian
44	Nana	19	M	LL	Buddhist
45	Paw	17	M	LL	Buddhist
46	Ton	21	M	LL	Buddhist

Appendix Two: Interview questions.

Name?

Age?

Ethnic group?

Village?

Are you a student? Working?

Level of education?

Religion?

Is religion important to you?

How long have you been living in Vientiane?

(If applicable) Why did you move to Vientiane?

Where do you volunteer?

Why did you become a volunteer?

Tell me about a normal day for you.

Activity: Stairs of wellbeing.

- Think about your life right now. If the top step (number ten) means that your life is perfectly happy and the bottom step (number one) means that there is nothing happy about your life, which step are you currently on?
- What are the things that you would need to change in order to be on step ten?
- What are the things in your life that move you up the

Tell me about something today that has made you happy?

When can you remember being the happiest?

What is happiness? What does it mean to you?

What makes you happy?

Is your happiness something that you think about a lot? When do you think about your happiness?

Is happiness something that you talk about with your family? With your friends?

Additional questions added part way through the fieldwork period:

Is it important to be happy? Why? Is it more important to be happy or successful? Happy or rich?

Can you think of any ways that your happiness is connected to other people's happiness? Is it better to be *jai yen* or *jai hawn*? Do you think you will be more happy if you are *jai yen* or *jai hawn*?

Is there a connection between volunteering and happiness?

Appendix Three: Overview of Workshops

Organisation	Total number of workshops
PVG	11
DC&YDC	9
Other civil society organisations working with young volunteers	3

PVG

Workshops details	Number of attendees
Introductory workshop x 2 Included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to me and the research • Groundrules/ethics • What makes Lao young people happy? • What are the 5 things that are most important for your happiness? 	First introductory workshop – 16 Second introductory workshop – 10
Team-building workshop x 2 Included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Various games and activities for participants to get to know each other and work together 	First team-building workshop – 13 Second team – building workshop – 17
Doing research Included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is research? • What are research questions? 	13

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which questions about happiness are you interested in? • Trying out different types of activities 	
<p>What is happiness?</p> <p>Included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the things that you need to have a good life? • What does happiness mean to you? • Different words to describe happiness. 	10
<p>Family and friends and happiness</p> <p>Included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does it mean to have a warm family? • What makes some friends good? • Why are friends and family important to happiness? 	8
<p>What can we do to make ourselves more happy?</p> <p>Included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is happiness within our control? • What can you do today to be happy? • What is important for your future happiness? 	6
Group discussion about social media and the internet	6
Group discussion about being a volunteer	5
Group discussion about relationships (boyfriends/girlfriends)	7
<p>Feedback workshop</p> <p>Included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of the emerging themes • Discussion of the links between the themes 	15

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise to try and ‘map’ happiness words • Discussion of ethics and any other questions about the research 	
Total number of attendees	126
Approximate number of different individual attendees	24

DC&YDC (descriptions as above except where noted)

Introductory workshop	17
Teambuilding	13
Doing Research	22
Being a volunteer (similar to group discussion above but included an art activity about why participants volunteer)	29
What is happiness?	15
Family and friends and happiness	10
Happiness in Laos Included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What makes Lao people happy? • Changes in Laos • Religion and happiness • What makes you happy in Ban Dongsavat? 	15
Dreams for the future Included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you want to do in the future? • What do you need to have a happy future? • What do you have control over? What don't you have control over? 	10
Feedback workshop	17

Total number of attendees	148
Approximate number of different individual attendees	36

Introductory workshops at other civil society organisations

	Number of attendees
Organisation 1	24
Organisation 2	8
Organisation 3	19